

ALIEN

E N G I N E E R S

The origin of man is not on Earth.



A novel by

Anna Lee Stafford

Screenplay by **Jon Spaihts**

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Watts' eyes widened as the parasite stood behind Vigoda, having trebled in size. She tried to get his attention, but she was held in place by the extensive medical apparatus fused to her body. She could only watch as it leaped at him, tearing his throat out and sending him to the floor.

The Med Pod continued to tug and sew at her guts as she stared at the dead man in a fog of horror. The parasite stood over its fresh kill, its skin splitting and spraying the carpet with acid. Limbs erupted from its shoulders and haunches, accompanied by spines through its back—a beautiful and terrifying metamorphosis.

With a crack of its carapace, its head swung down from its serpentine position. It was a fully grown alien.

A L I E N E N G I N E E R S

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A L I E N
E N G I N E E R S

novelization by
ANNA LEE STAFORD

based on a screenplay by
JON SPAIHTS

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With thanks to the people that read my *Resident Evil* content, and will hopefully stick around for everything else.

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O N E

On humanity's greatest day, the world turned as it always did.

Originally, there were no traces of civilization as we'd come to understand it. Earth was a veritable clean slate. Its resources were largely untouched. Its many ecosystems had yet to be tainted by the horrors of industrialization. Instead, its landscapes existed to showcase the ingenuity and creativity of the various indigenous cultures they would help cultivate.

The fauna that inhabited the Earth's surface in 12,000 B.C. would not have responded to the shadow

that cast itself over them with more than an aside glance. Not only was it moving at a speed that was imperceptible to them, but they lacked the brain capacity to question its existence beyond whether or not it was an immediate threat.

The shadow continued its sustained glide over mountains and glaciers, reduced by altitude to abstractions—shapes that blended with the rest of the world into a cascading visual puree. The terrain was multitudinous yet unable to serve the divine purpose. Neither it nor the vast body of water connected to it would be suitable.

Then, a beach heralded the final stage of the journey: from pristine, clear waters to pearl-white sand to a sweeping lowland plain at the foot of a towering volcanic mountain.

A human mind, no matter how advanced, would never ascertain why this needed to be the place for such a ceremony. This truth was not humanity's to know. Yet, the questions it engendered could define their journey as a species.

Did these emissaries think of that as they emerged from the shadow, savoring the feeling of the Earth beneath their bare feet and the fresh breeze as it warped around their snow-white skin? Did they even think in the way that humans eventually would?

They were a trio—men, yet not men. Stumbling upon them as they stood in a perfect triangle, arms outstretched, showcasing their heavy, classical features and muscular bodies, one would assume that they were molded in the vein of Rodin's Thinker.

The trio gazed upon each other with jet-black eyes that glinted in the sun's light. Their heads were hairless and earless. They didn't have physical traits that distinguished them from each other. They didn't need them. They were a seamless collective working efficiently to a shared goal—no dissent or weakness.

They were Engineers.

This would be their creation.

In the center of their formation stood a box whose only defining feature was its matte black surface. It served as a harbinger of its contents, a warning that the person who opened it would find nothing but the void.

Two of the Engineers wore dark robes with intricate designs. However, this garb was not a demonstration of vanity—quite the opposite. The third Engineer stood naked. Its body was on full display to be admired and revered. It would use that body to achieve a great and powerful end, and it deserved reverence.

The naked Engineer approached the box, lifting the lid to reveal a mass of dark, sticky organic material undulating with the millions of lives it harbored. The material clung to the Engineer's palms as it was lifted from its container. With a deliberate and graceful slowness, the Engineer raised this seething, humming mass to its lips as it foamed into iridescent spheres.

It was time for the sacrament to begin.

The other Engineers watched as the material's boiling surface released a swarm of insects. They were genetically engineered, their bodies resembling scarabs. They nestled at the point of contact, huddling as they chattered.

The Engineer stared at its compatriots as its lips began to melt away. Each scarab chewed a microscopic piece of flesh, exposing teeth and lining the Engineer's chin with rivulets of viscous black blood. From there, the swarm expanded outwards, feasting on the flesh and dissolving the bone.

This Engineer was being eaten alive.

To the uninitiated, such a ritual would appear barbaric. However, outsiders would not be able to comprehend the nuances of such a process. They would not recognize the cells rupturing and bleeding, the protein chains unfolding, the DNA spiral

unraveling, the scarabs filling their bellies with genetic material.

If the Engineer felt pain, it didn't express it as it stood cruciform, arms outstretched. As soon as its head was devoured, the scarabs continued their journey downward, eating away at their host's shoulders down to its chest.

The cloaked Engineers watched impassively. Everything was happening as it should. They were amid a great ascension, which could only come with an even greater sacrifice.

Eventually, the scarabs had whittled down their vessel to a disembodied waist and legs. What was left of the Engineer collapsed sideways, toppling majestically like a felled tree. The ritual was nearing its end.

As soon as nothing of the Engineer was left, not even a single atom scattered amongst the grass, the scarabs dispersed in all directions, carrying DNA across the sweeping plains to the rest of the Earth.

In time, their creation would take its first steps.

In a time far beyond hers, she would be known by many names, including Eve, Shatarupa, Oxomoco, Embla, Mumbi, Waramurungundi, and Marikoriko.

For now, she was like the Engineers—man, but not man. She was a bipedal mammal. She could use tools. She could demonstrate basic reasoning. She was the result of millions of years of evolutionary progress. But, she was only the first step.

She stood at a great height, the densely packed forest vegetation below her. A dark shape in the sky captivated her attention, a sight that she didn't understand. It elevated further upwards, causing her to crane her neck to keep it in view.

Then, with an aggressive gust of wind, it disappeared, leaving the woman alone in her confusion.

In time, her survival instincts would return, and she would leave the thoughts of the dark shape behind as she returned to her routine.

Then, a sharp sting needled the back of her neck. Her body acted immediately, pupils dilating, breath hissing into her lungs. She smacked the spot, feeling the carapace break and the innards ooze out onto her palm.

She moved her hand in front of her face, observing the dying insect as it clicked the tiny mandibles that it had just used to bite her, injecting its cargo of DNA into her blood.

Then, the insect crumbled to dust. She watched as the wind carried its particles away, blissfully unaware that she had just become patient zero.

T W O

On Dr. Jocelyn Watts' greatest day, the world turned as it always did.

She was a precocious scholar, having dedicated much of her 32 years to intimately pouring over all kinds of academic disciplines. There was a reason she could introduce herself to others as an archaeologist with degrees in paleontology, anthropology, human ethology, and memetics courtesy of Oxford—not that she would, of course. She was also well-versed in humility.

The rigorous study provided its own wonders: exposure to some of the brightest intellects in human history. But for Watts, nothing compared to the allure of field study. She yearned to apply her knowledge and make the kinds of discoveries that would cement her status as a revered contributor to mankind's endless forward march.

Martin told her to wait until daylight. That was a reasonable suggestion, but he also understood that hunger was a tough impulse to ignore. As soon as Watts knew what was out there, she needed to see it with her own eyes as quickly as possible. Was it unlikely that an event could occur in the next twelve hours that would destroy her opportunity? Sure. But it wasn't impossible.

So, she sat inside the sturdy excavator's glass bubble cockpit, watching the robotic arms scan the ocean waters around her. The floodlights did all they could to beat back the all-consuming darkness, but they faced an uphill battle.

Watts didn't mind. That only added to the mystery—the intrigue. Who knew what was lurking in the shadows, waiting to be discovered?

The only part that Watts minded was the sweltering heat. She could feel the cotton of her loose

gray t-shirt cling to her chest, her shorts starting to chafe her thighs, and her toes itching inside her boots.

It would all be worth it in the end.

She deftly worked the controls, descending the excavator toward a rocky surface. Silt billowed up, heralding her approach. She had never been this far underwater before. It was peaceful—like being in the world's largest sensory deprivation tank. The only sounds were the engine's hum and the cowled propellers' rhythmic revolutions.

That was to say nothing about the sights. The surface had its beauty, but one had to look past the impact of far-reaching industrial structures that dominated the land. It was hard not to look at these towering spires of murky concrete and steel and recognize them for what they were: testaments to human indifference—indifference towards the people who worked tirelessly to build them, indifference to the Indigenous people whose land was stolen to serve as the foundation, indifference to those affected by the environmental impact such projects caused. And to what end? So a Weyland Corporation executive could get hollow satisfaction from a slight rise in a line graph? It was hard to feel wonder or inspiration from such a thing.

The sea might also have been affected by man's carelessness, but it retained its effortless natural splendor for now. Watts was captivated by the groups of plankton that reflected her floodlights, creating a little aquatic starscape that seemed to welcome her.

She steered her excavator to a steeply sloping cliff wall. Below, a sea trench yawned, its depths unfathomable.

It was time to call it in.

"Moving to survey site B... closing on object four. The large oblong."

She hoped Martin was paying attention. The next few minutes would be crucial to her career and humanity's existence, and she wanted to ensure he could witness it.

She watched the screen of her excavator's ground-penetrating radar system. Every little blip caused her hair to stand on end. She was so close. She could feel it.

Then, a bright signal returned. Something was hidden in the cliff in front of her—something big.

"There you are," She whispered, the excitement threatening to trap the words inside her throat as her breathing fastened.

She engaged the excavator's digger arm, watching it roar to life before carving into the cliff's

surface, silt and boulders falling to the depths below. As she used a water cannon to clear the loose debris, she ignored the pangs of guilt from intruding on the ecosystem. In this case, the ends more than justified the means.

Eventually, the cliff face collapsed, resulting in a muddy landslide into the abyss. Watts backed the excavator away, its thrusters whirring to keep her out of the turbulence.

The cloud of sediment cleared. That was when Watts found it.

An obelisk, easily thirty feet tall, stood before her. The ages had worn its outlines, but even erosion couldn't eradicate its elaborate markings.

Watts was stunned. For what felt like an eternity, all she could do was stare.

Then, she activated her comms, her voice husky. "Martin. Here."

The second the words left her mouth, she shielded her eyes as another pair of floodlights filled her cockpit. An excavator glided through the dark, taking its place next to hers.

Once it repositioned itself so the lights were on the obelisk and no longer baring down on her, she could see the pilot.

It was Professor Martin Holloway. He was fifteen years her senior—a visionary genius and archaeologist. His rangy frontiersman build was dressed in work trousers and a shirt in typical Holloway fashion. If he'd hoped to maintain any semblance of professionalism, the sweat stains that dominated his clothes had other ideas.

He was equally as stunned by the obelisk, only managing a breathy “Look at that.”

Watts needed a closer look. She floated her excavator down the front of the obelisk, sending its arms to grip the stone tower and hold herself in place. She scanned the symbols up close. If they were the alien text that she suspected they would be—if this were evidence of first contact-

She stopped herself. Now wasn't the time to jump to conclusions. She needed a second opinion.

“You need to see this,” She called out to Holloway.

“Coming.”

Holloway was an expert with the excavators, having no trouble sliding up to Watts and mating their vehicles at their aft hatchways.

She didn't avert her eyes from the obelisk, even as the hatch opened with a water splatter that riddled her neck and back. Holloway climbed in, trying to

position himself in the tight quarters. She could sense him being distracted by her body as it pressed close to his. But, at this moment, she only had eyes for the inscrutable writing outside the glass.

“Same thing again,” She muttered.

“What do you see?” He replied. The response felt programmed, a half-hearted eschewing of a potentially romantic moment for a thudding return to reality.

“An ephemeris—a star map.”

Watts pressed a fingertip against the glass, trying to indicate to the obelisk outside.

“Radius, inclination, azimuth... more data here...”

Holloway had switched on, his voice giving way to an analytical monotone.

“If we can get epoch and equinox out of that-”

“Can we raise this thing?” Watts eagerly enquired.

Holloway shook his head.

“Hundreds of tons.”

An excited buzz filled Watts’ body as cranes lifted the excavators from the ocean onto the research vessel they had called home for the past month.

On paper, it felt like a honeymoon. The couple was to anchor in the Mediterranean Sea, where they'd be greeted daily by turquoise sea and bright sun. In the distance, a picturesque coastline dotted with beautiful villas was flanked by a dominating volcanic peak.

Watts and Holloway shared many connections, from scientific interests to mutual attraction. It would have been so easy to give in. They were tanned, fit, beautiful people working under the most idyllic conditions humanly possible.

But they believed wholeheartedly in the work. That meant they were on a strict regimen of labor and sleep, with little time for anything else. Once they'd made their discovery, they could explore their feelings however they saw fit.

They spent the night on the aft deck of their vessel. Under an awning, they'd placed various prints of the obelisk's faces, stretching them out over the deck, creating a fifteen-foot collage that begged for examination.

With flashlights in one hand and red markers in the other, they weaved around each other as they examined the text closely, parsing, translating, and calculating.

Time flew past, and Watts realized that her light was becoming redundant as the freshly rising sun was more than happy to perform the job. Yet, she didn't feel a hint of fatigue. Her body surged with activity.

She and Holloway switched to a pair of electronic slabs, surveying the red ink markings and annotations they each made.

They were rapidly approaching the moment of truth.

Holloway was the first to speak up, sitting on a desk nearby.

"I have a solution. A single match."

"Me too," Watts excitedly snapped back.

"Checked it twice."

Holloway smiled, "You first."

She took a deep breath before holding up her slate, revealing a set of stellar coordinates—a detailed star map.

She tried to gauge Holloway's response, but he remained perfectly calm. Doubt started to fill her mind. Soon would be the moment when Holloway revealed that they'd made a mistake somewhere. They would have to return to the drawing board, and all that tiredness Watts had fended off would come crashing down like a tsunami.

Then, Holloway raised his slab.

It was an exact match.

Watts' heart skipped a beat, fighting every urge to toss the electronic slab aside and throw herself at Holloway like a guided missile. It would be one thing had she just discovered proof of an alien civilization, but to do that and receive an invitation to their world with a map of the stars? This discovery had implications for the future of humanity that she couldn't even hope to fathom, and it was all hers. She had found her place in history.

Watts empathized with the volcano as she felt primed to burst from sheer elation. She took deep breaths, calming herself down to the point where she could communicate again.

"What do we do now?" She whispered excitedly, knowing full well what the answer would be. She wanted to hear it from him. It would be the only way she knew this wasn't a dream.

Holloway scratched his stubbly chin, shaking with giddiness.

"We go there."

T H R E E

There had yet to be a more considerable barrier to progress than capitalism. Whether you were an artist preparing your visionary magnum opus or a scientist eager to bring forth the discovery that sent humanity one giant leap into the future, your success was predicated solely on your ability to negotiate capital.

The past few months proved that for Watts beyond any measure of doubt. She knew her data was solid and had the qualifications to back up anything

she said. However, that fact did little to cushion her from the string of rejections that came with every pitch. The hollowed-out husks who dedicated their lives to hoarding wealth and resources didn't see the merit in funding one of the most important journeys that mankind could ever take. Sure, it guaranteed answers to some of man's most burning questions, but would it also make an arbitrary line go up?

Watts tried to temper the bitterness radiating from her in waves by looking out the window of the shuttlecraft she and Holloway were now strapped into. It was no bigger than a private jet. But she couldn't shake off thoughts about how much fuel was being wasted carrying such a large vessel for only two passengers.

She'd never been to space before. While such a journey was possible, she was always more preoccupied with the many mysteries of the Earth. Space was a refuge for wealthy people who erroneously thought interstellar travel would free them from their empty selves. Still, she couldn't deny the celestial majesty that greeted her outside, from the stars stretched out across the void to the ethereal mural of heavenly blues and greens that was the Earth.

Then, she turned to see her destination, a gleaming, white, radial space station with black letters that read ‘Weyland’s Wheel.’

Peter Weyland had been the last person she and Holloway expected to approach. When they started collating a list of potential investors, his name was brought up first and immediately struck because it was fanciful at best and reckless at worst. The only part of him that was larger than his net worth was his ego. His base of operations was a wheel in space that he named after himself.

The closer they got to the station, the more Watts was overcome with helplessness. This whole venture was pointless. There was no reason why Weyland wouldn’t respond the way all the others had. Once he rejected them, they would officially have exhausted all options.

All that work... for nothing.

She needed a distraction.

Watts turned to Holloway, who was sitting opposite her. He was fidgeting with a pen in his outstretched hands, letting the zero gravity carry it from side to side.

She cleared her throat.

“What’s first? You do climate, I do genetics?”

“Archaeology first,” Holloway responded. “Let our ancestors tell the tale.”

The response threw Watts. She was expecting something more acidic, like he had shared her cynicism.

“You think he’s serious?”

Holloway shrugged. “Serious enough to send his private shuttle.”

“Weyland can send his shuttle out for pizza.”

Watts deflated. It appeared that Holloway was still in the denial stage of their shared grief.

“Martin. If this meeting goes like the others, maybe we should-”

“It won’t go like the others,” He interjected with a confidence that took her aback.

All she could muster was a stunned “How do you know?”

Holloway plucked the pen from the air, using it as a pointer rod at the crescent-shaped moon, which resembled the toothy grin Holloway was now sporting.

“Heaven smiles on our enterprise.”

Watts meditated on what that meant as she could feel the shuttle click into place—docking perfectly into the Wheel’s hub.

Eventually, the duo found themselves in a gleaming capsule elevator, floating weightlessly between handholds as they gazed into space.

As soon as the doors closed, Watts grabbed Holloway by the collar, pulling him close. Their lips met—not their first kiss, but their most passionate in a long time. At that moment, she could sense the carnal desire between the two of them that had built up and was reaching critical mass. She wanted to be a naiad in his arms and have him take her amongst the stars—no physical connection to anything but each other.

But it wouldn't be long before the elevator reached the station's rim. Besides, they were in an elevator owned by a corporation so large that it was the only one to have a branch that operated in space.

There was a zero percent chance they weren't being watched.

The Wheel's lobby was luxurious, from the tasteful lighting to the Eames-era furniture. The aesthetic oscillated between warm wood and striking chrome, portraying the past's vision of the future. Of course, it had to if it wanted to maintain any semblance of luxury. The real future was bleak and

oppressive, not the utopia the old world made it out to be.

Watts and Holloway stumbled as the simulated gravity forced them out of their weightlessness. Holloway fought to keep himself from dropping the sleek metal folio under his armpit. If that broke, their meeting with Weyland would end quicker than Watts expected.

She tried to use her surroundings to set her bearings, but their unconventional designs were of little help. The floor was the Wheel's outer surface, meaning it curved upward out of sight. The walls were all windows, surrounding the pair with a wheeling field of stars.

Then, a man slowly formed in the distance, the rotating floor exposing his feet, then his legs, and eventually his whole body. He was a gaunt, thin figure who stood perfectly stiff in gray, featureless clothing. His blank stare said everything. He was an android. Watts had heard of these automatons and their supposed use by the Weyland Corporation, but she'd yet to see one in person.

As they approached the android, he greeted them with a welcoming nod.

“Professor Holloway. Dr. Watts. My name is DAVID.”

Watts raised her arm, giving an awkward wave. “Hello, DAVID.”

Her face reddened. She felt out of place. She was used to dealing with lifeless office buildings and slick corporate drones, not space travel and robots.

DAVID paid her no mind as his artificial eyes drifted between her and Holloway.

“Mr. Weyland’s eager to meet you.”

With that, he turned and broke into a stride across the foyer. For a brief moment, Watts and Holloway met eyes. His excited smirk met her concern as if he was trying to say, ‘I told you so.’

Then, Watts realized that the situation was a win-win for her. If Holloway were right, she would start the long-awaited next stage of her work. If she were right, she’d rub it in his face twice as hard.

The duo followed DAVID into an exhibit hall that wasted no time surrounding them with models of planets, moons, and asteroids—all holograms with labels and data that swirled around them like their own personal celestial bodies.

“These are all the planetary bodies on which Weyland Industries has mining claims,” DAVID announced.

Watts ignored the bombardment of information. She already knew Weyland had his sights on stripping

the solar system for parts like his own personal junkyard. Any questions she had were solely about DAVID. How did he function? What was he like? What did he think?

Eventually, the trio reached the other end of the hall, dominated by a vast red globe depicting Mars. Its surface lit up with widespread activity.

“And Mars. Weyland’s crown jewel,” DAVID added.

Holloway spoke up. “How is that going? The terraforming?”

Watts couldn’t stop herself. The sheer vanity of Weyland’s outpost was getting to her. “They say you’re getting diminishing returns. It’s not working.”

DAVID paused as though he was cycling through responses in his cybernetic brain. Then, his lips pursed.

“It’s the greatest engineering project ever attempted. Challenges are inevitable. Mr. Weyland’s a determined man.”

As DAVID turned away, Watts scrunched up her face. Did DAVID believe that, or was he just programmed to say it? Either way, it perfectly portrayed the capitalist class—keep plundering to no end until there’s nothing left.

Watts couldn't wait to get out of here. Even the infinite vacuum of space outside was less suffocating.

Peter Weyland regarded Watts and Holloway from behind a mahogany desk inside his ornate office. He carried himself with a kind of Warren Buffet-esque demeanor—country sage meets horse sense meets hard knocks. His presence put his age somewhere between seventy and one hundred and seventy.

The woman behind him, however, had the aura of a great white shark in her costly business suit, which she no doubt paid for by trading in ruthlessness. Watts could feel her shrewd, watchful gaze mentally stripping them down for signs of weakness.

DAVID stood against the wall, staring blankly—the perfectly neutral party.

“Professor Holloway,” Weyland coughed up with his grisly voice. “Ms. Watts—”

“Doctor Watts,” she corrected. She didn't care if he was the wealthiest person on Earth and Space; she was not letting him get away with such callous disrespect.

“Forgive me,” He responded, outstretching a wrinkled, bony hand. “Peter Weyland.”

Watts shook the man's hand, noting the feeble grip. Just this once, she wanted to abandon decorum and demand the money she needed from this pathetic man. He wouldn't understand the science they were about to present to him. He probably barely understood anything outside of his ill-gotten wealth. To him, their pitch was nothing more than a show that had to keep his interest, like keys dangled in front of a child.

Then again, if Watts tried to assert any kind of dominance, she'd probably end up flat on her ass, thanks to the woman standing behind Weyland.

So Watts turned away from Weyland and stared at DAVID, letting her curiosity for him overcome her disgust.

She didn't see the smile that crept across Weyland's face until he spoke.

"Ah. DAVID here's a prototype. Our 80 series. One of a kind for now, but if he performs, he will be legion."

Once the handshake stopped, Weyland retreated into his seat, the smile fading.

"What do you want here?"

The question startled Holloway. He'd gotten used to hearing 'We read your submission' or 'Let's

get down to business!’ None of the people they’d approached had appeared so flippant and careless.

“We sent you a prospectus that—”

“Assume I know nothing.”

That’s not a challenging prospect, Watts thought, fighting the urge to smirk.

With a nervous swallow, Holloway placed the metal folio on Weyland’s desk.

“I’m an archaeologist,” He stated, procuring a tiny remote from his pocket. With a press of a button, holograms materialized over the folio. They were a series of pictures depicting a younger Holloway in the field. Watts had seen these images many times, yet they never got old. Here was the man she loved, engaged in work that she loved, excavating ruins in places she loved—Egypt, China, Peru, Greece.

Weyland appeared unmoved as Holloway continued.

“In my studies I discovered a pattern I couldn’t explain. Every eleven hundred years, sudden advances in agriculture, tool use, technology. Inventions. Something caused a great leap forward. Every eleven centuries. The pattern holds as far back as our data goes. Tens of thousands of years. I had to understand this. It became the focus of my work.”

Weyland's head shifted—the most non-committal nod. Holloway forged on, unperturbed.

“Dr. Watts was a student of mine.”

That was her cue. Watts pulled out her remote, pressing a button that converted all the holographic images into scientific diagrams. Interspersed with this were photos of a time early in her studies when she spent most of her time in the lab.

“I was analyzing historical changes in human DNA. I found the same pattern. Every eleven centuries, a pulse of new information in the genome of the human race. All over the world. Evolution can't do that. Something was changing us. Changing the DNA of our species.”

Holloway chimed in. “Humanity's been visited. Visited by... beings from somewhere else.”

“You mean aliens?”

It was the woman behind Weyland, who was now sporting a scowl of disdain. Holloway and Watts had grown used to her response. Around this point, each of the presentations would typically derail.

Weyland, however, didn't end the presentation there. Instead, he indicated to the woman.

“Lydia Vickers, Director of Operations. Practically my right hand.”

Holloway waited for a beat, expecting Weyland to prime his rejection, only to be met with silence.

So, he continued.

“They guided us to civilization. Lifted us up, again and again. I call them Engineers.”

“Once you know what you’re looking for,” Watts added, “it’s amazing how the evidence falls into place.”

She pressed another button, causing the holograms to change. This time, the photographs flickered into images of her and Holloway in the field, excavating new sites and growing closer and closer to each one.

Each photo contained more evidence: columns of writing on stone tablets in Egypt, China, Cambodia, and Peru, all featuring the same patterns of lines, curves, and dots.

“This is the writing of the Engineers,” Holloway explained. “We found it on every continent. And last year, we found our Rosetta Stone.”

Watts swelled with pride as the display changed to a breathtaking vista of the obelisk, nestled in the broken cliff wall and bathed in the azure hues of the Mediterranean Sea.

“The writing is a formula giving the location of a single star in our sky.”

One of Weyland's thin, gray eyebrows raised with curiosity. "Which star?"

"We're keeping that confidential for now," Holloway jumped in. "But that's where we wanted to go."

Weyland gave a throaty, hacking chuckle—a spiteful sound he forced out from his withered, phlegm-ridden lungs.

"You want me to pay for an interstellar research expedition!"

Holloway was reduced to a scolded child, mumbling with his head down.

"It's a chance to be part of a revolution in scientific—"

"Don't sell me, professor. You've been turned down by every university and government agency under the sun. Nobody's going to gamble that kind of money on your hunch..."

That shut Holloway up. Watts felt a boulder form in her stomach. Rejection hit her like a wave despite her brain trying to prepare her for the worst-case scenario—telling her this was a lost cause and they had already run out of options long before they contacted Weyland. They were no longer in a meeting; this was a bloodbath.

Then, the enigmatic CEO stood up, planting his palms on the soft wood of the desk.

“Nobody but me,” He said with a grin. “I’ve read your research.”

“That’s impossible,” Holloway sulked. “Our research is-”

“Quantum encoded on secure servers, yeah.” Weyland gave a dismissive wave as he reached a bony hand into his trouser pocket, pulling out another small remote resembling Watts and Holloway’s.

He pressed a button, causing the display to change once again. This time, the room was filled with images of files being accessed, their data mined, and sent to external servers.

Watts and Holloway were speechless. They were watching their work being effortlessly plundered.

“We have an A.I. division, you should know. Doing impressive things.” Weylon purred as he leaned across the desk. “I know which star you’re wishing on.”

Questions filled Watts’ head. Why would Weyland waste time with them if he had all their research at his beck and call? Why didn’t he just send his team to investigate the star? The only explanation was that he didn’t just believe their research... he believed in them.

But that didn't feel right. What if Weyland was playing another one of his mind games? It had to stop. Someone had to say something.

She had to say something.

"You're bluffing."

His gaze pierced her like a chess player who had cornered his opponent and was now seconds from initiating a checkmate. As the words rolled out of his mouth, he gave each one a pause, allowing them to get underneath their skin.

"Zeta Two Reticuli."

He wasn't bluffing. He was right.

Watts and Holloway were too stunned to respond, just as Weyland wanted them. They weren't negotiating with him any longer. He had complete control over how the rest of this discussion would go.

"You know how I got this rich? I ask myself: what does God spend his time doing? And I go do that."

Watts wanted to laugh. It was the kind of cheesy line one printed in a magazine spread for a wealthy celebrity subject they were intending to mock. Yet, Weyland's wide eyes and unwavering gaze suggested this was a belief he indeed held.

"Biotechnology was good to me. Fusion power. Lately doing well with gravity systems."

Weyland turned to the window behind him, overlooking the Earth as it slowly turned—a self-proclaimed aspirant to godhood overlooking his domain.

“But what’s the first thing God did?”

“He made the Heaven and the Earth,” Watts mumbled, autopilot guiding her through the fog dominating her brain.

He jabbed a finger at her like a carnival barker announcing a prize.

“That’s what I’m talking about. You left out my favorite part. The piece about Earth.”

Weyland pointed to David.

“DAVID.”

“For eons, Earth’s climate swung from hothouse to ice age. Explosions of life, then mass extinctions. But twelve thousand years ago the swings stopped. The Holocene Epoch began - a period of anomalous tranquility. The rise of civilization began only then.”

Holloway was smiling as he answered, “That’s right.”

Watts could understand why. After months of talking at different brick walls, DAVID was finally the first to get it.

So, she joined in.

“And that change coincides with a visit by the Engineers. They didn’t just change us. They changed our world.”

“That’s the piece I mean,” Weyland announced as he turned back to face the duo. “Engineering. Earth. God stuff.”

He started rummaging through a desk drawer.

“My people checked your science. They say it’s solid.”

Watts tensed up. Was this happening? Was this actually happening? Weyland placed a thick contract on the table in front of Holloway.

“I’ll give you your expedition. Ship and crew, supplies, support. One condition.”

“What’s that?” Holloway asked as he picked up the contract with the cautious joy one showed when double-checking a lottery ticket.

“You get the discovery. Control of the site. But any technology you find? Anything at all. That’s mine.”

Watts wanted to argue. If they were to discover any technology, it’d be too important to be subject to the whims of a dying old capitalist. Still, beggars couldn’t be choosers. The discovery would be worth it.

“You take DAVID with you. My eyes and ears.”

Watts turned to the android, gauging his response, not entirely surprised that there wasn't one.

“And Vickers...”

She jolted to life, whipping her head toward her boss.

“You're going too.”

Though she tried to maintain her stone-like demeanor, Watts noticed the shock on her face.

The expedition was a go.

Hopefully, Weyland's agenda wouldn't interfere too much.

Whatever it was.

F O U R

The Magellan was a bright, new star in a sea of many—a sturdy prospecting ship that, though travel-worn, forged its way through space with temerity. Weyland Industries built this vessel to last.

The same could be said for DAVID, who stood on the ship's bridge. The entire forward bulkhead was a window: wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling, the perfect place to gaze into the cosmos.

The environment was the epitome of bliss. The bridge's six control stations were empty and quiet, and the interior lights were dimmed to a soothing

blue. Still, DAVID knew this tranquility wouldn't last. In time, the Magellan would be full of suffocating activity.

The ship seemed to think so, too, as the serenity was interrupted by the hum of internal mechanisms grinding into place. Outside, massive shutters clicked their way across, segment by segment, until the window was completely covered.

DAVID strolled into the ship's long central corridor, where the silence continued, blanketing him with the darkness. Without Weyland barking in his ear, he could think freely. So, he did.

But before acting on those thoughts, he needed to check on the children.

His destination was a spacious chamber with walls of chrome steel. Flanking him on either side were a dozen plexiglass sarcophagi—cryogenic sleep pods, each containing a human silhouette lined with frost. DAVID glanced at each one. Nothing seemed out of place. They were lying perfectly still, having the best sleep they ever would. Eventually, he would have to wake them up—a dreaded task. He didn't want to interrupt their no doubt pleasant dreams and bring the harsh realities of the effect of deep space travel on their bodies any more than he wanted to fill the Magellan with their debilitating sound and stench.

His journey ended in the workroom, where he sat at a display table under auburn lamplight. To any passerby, he would have appeared crazy, waving his hands across the desk's surface, moving intricate technical documents.

They wouldn't realize he was reading at a speed no human could match.

A drumming sensation rattled the inside of Watts' skull, Krakatoa erupting between her eyes. Searing white flooded her vision as sensations slithered through her skin. She tried to move, but her limbs hadn't yet gotten the memo that such a thing was possible. Only her neck complied as a dull ache wrapped around her shoulders.

She looked down at her body, which had become a landscape of smooth white curves like snowy fields showered in crystals—broken only by the cotton of her gray underwear and the IV lines that dug into her elbows and ankles.

In time, the war drums would fade, allowing thoughts to settle in her head. Her limbs would regain their mobility. She would just need to wait.

But shapes formed in the glass before her, dark and ominous, obscured in the frost. Something was watching her.

DAVID considered intervening as he spotted them out of the corner of his eye. Yet, something about the situation fascinated him that he had yet to interrogate.

The cryo pods had all been opened except for two. Dr. Jocelyn Watts and Professor Martin Holloway were awake but needed time to acclimate, so they lay there inert.

A trio in blue coveralls were crouched beside Watts' pod, trying to ogle through the fog-covered glass. DAVID knew their names; Downs was the lean and fidgety one, Stillwell was sturdy with the geniality of a labrador, and the young Kamarov had a dark, brooding air that belonged to a man twice his age.

A man like Holloway, perhaps?

"Look at that," Downs grunted as Kamarov opened the lid to Watts' freezer. She stirred inside, a drowsy angel. DAVID wondered what the fascination was. Had these men not seen a woman before?

"She wakes up slow," Kamarov observed. Watts was visibly uncomfortable, trying to pull away from their looming eyes, tangling her hands in her IV lines. DAVID decided he'd seen enough and was about to make his presence known when-

“Get out of there!”

Downs, Stillwell, and Kamarov jumped back as the voice next to them cracked like a whip. It belonged to Holloway, who had fought through atrophied muscles and stiff joints to shove the lid of his pod open. The others watched in shock as he yanked the IV lines out of his arms and legs before climbing out and standing confidently before them. DAVID watched the masculine ritual with amusement, wondering whether a fight would break out between these great apes.

Stillwell tried to diffuse the situation with a shrug and a “just looking.”

Holloway was unamused, glaring at the trio in a way that warned them to cross him. At first, such an attempt at intimidation puzzled DAVID. Holloway was outnumbered three to one, and his body was staving off the effects of cryostasis. Nevertheless, it paid off. The crewmen filed out, Stillwell sheepishly, followed by the more surly Downs and Kamarov. Holloway was unfazed. He didn’t care about any of them the second they were out of them.

He only cared for Watts. DAVID watched as he gently removed the IV lines from her ankles.

“I’m out of sorts,” She mumbled as she plucked the IV lines from her arms. “Sorry.”

Holloway smiled, "Never worry."

He helped her up, and they stared into each other's eyes, emotions flooding between them. They were finally in space, actively pursuing their dream.

DAVID pitied them.

The Magellan's Mess Hall was a considerably large building, perfect for housing a crew that each wanted their own space. Still, Watts felt like an enclosed zoo animal as she hunched over the table, hungover, trying to swallow the abrasive mix of cheap instant coffee and the oat and honey-flavored snack bar that was content with settling in her throat.

She was distracted from the withering gaze of the passersby, thanks to the relentless chill that had settled in the upper layer of her skin. Although she was dressed warmly in thick civvies, her body still insisted on shivering. She turned to Holloway, whose teeth were also chattering.

"My head's buzzing."

"You just slept two and a half years. It'll pass."

She smirked, "Like you've done this before."

"I've read all about it."

Holloway gulped down the rest of his coffee, ending the conversation before Watts could rib him further.

Two of the Magellan's officers entered, wearing the same blue coveralls as the rest of the crew. Their name badges read 'Glasse' and 'Brick.' They stood over the two scientists, Glasse with his stocky arms folded and Brick running an exasperated hand over his bald head.

"Sleep okay?" Brick asked.

"Yes, thanks-" Watts murmured back.

"Captain'll see you now," Glasse jabbed in response. So much for any kind of hospitality or camaraderie. The only two people who didn't see this as a mind-numbing, menial job were those not in uniform.

Watts turned to Holloway who shrugged in response. They didn't want to keep the Captain waiting.

From inside a fridge, to the Mess Hall, to a steel bench in the Captain's Wardroom, Watts was beginning to suspect that she'd never feel comfortable again.

However, she couldn't deny that being in the presence of Captain Janek made her confident in the success of this mission. He had a bristling beard and a robust build that screamed swashbuckler. He would have looked more appropriate on a whaling vessel,

bellowing orders as the raging waves crashed into the deck below. Yet, here he was, sitting at his desk scanning his orders. In front of him was a stack of watermarked papers, all bearing the Weyland Industries logo.

“Zeta Two Reticuli was surveyed already. A hundred years ago,” He observed with a thick Australian accent.

Watts nodded, “By an unmanned probe. Very crude.”

He peered up at her.

“No Earthlike planets?”

“No.”

“So what are you looking for?”

“Proof of the Engineers’ existence,” Holloway answered.

Watts continued, “Confirmation of Professor Holloway’s theories would change everything. There’d be science before Holloway and science after.”

Was that a little dramatic? Perhaps. Watts wasn’t sure. But, damn it, someone had to have some enthusiasm here. Janek could sense her growing frustration, rubbing his face wearily.

“Your ticket. I’ll put the ship where you want. Run your scans.”

“Captain.”

Watts and Janek turned to Holloway, who looked concerned.

“Your crew’s been up for a week. We could’ve used the time. Why’d you wait to wake us?”

“Better for discipline,” Janek answered.

When Watts and Holloway didn’t respond, Janek continued with a sigh.

“Men ship out as prospectors for one reason: The percentage. Find a gold mine or a habitable planet, and you’re set for life.”

A bitter laugh punched through his lips before he continued.

“But this contract says no percentage. No bounty. Just triple pay. The men aren’t happy.”

Figures, Watts thought. She couldn’t blame the crew for their disdain. They were only going to help bring forth one of the most important discoveries in human history—was that not enough for Weyland to pay them properly?

“You unhappy too?” Holloway asked Janek.

“I’m always unhappy,” He bluntly fired back as he stood up, pressing his palm against a wall panel. A wall safe opened with a click, revealing a massive pistol holstered inside a leather gun belt. This piece of

hardware was old school, with Watts suspecting it could blow a man's head clean off.

As Janek placed the gun underneath the documents, Watts hoped that she'd never have to find out for sure.

Watts felt relieved when she finally reached her quarters, a scientist cabin that she would share with Holloway. It was a simple yet spacious room with twin beds and a window. It was also the first room in the entire ship to feel warm.

She and Holloway hoisted their duffel bags onto their respective beds. It looked like a comfortable space, but Holloway appeared perturbed. Watts could sense what was bothering him as he released the magnets that locked the beds down. She watched as he slid the two beds together.

From there, they set about preparing their workspace—a central table with huge wall display surfaces. It was decorating a teenager's bedroom. Instead of band posters, pin-ups, and movie memorabilia, they pinned documents with the Engineer alphabet, ancient art, and climate and genetic data.

To any outsider, it would appear cold and clinical. For Watts and Holloway, it was the closest they'd get to home until they were back on Earth.

Watts was so preoccupied, that she failed to notice DAVID entering until he stood in their doorway, eyeing them with the same stone-faced expression as always.

"DAVID," She said. "I wondered when we'd see you."

"I trust your database is in order. I set it up myself."

Watts gave a good-natured smile. There was no reason to eschew politeness, even to an android.

"All's well, I think."

DAVID turned to leave, only to hesitate in the doorway.

"I should tell you..."

He swiveled himself around, meeting Watts' curious gaze.

"... the time you spent sleeping, I spent studying your research."

Watts turned to Holloway. At first, it made sense. How else would he occupy his time alone on the ship?

Then it hit her.

"You studied our work for two and a half years."

“It’s quite a data set.”

She could hear Holloway’s heart racing in his chest. This was the perfect opportunity to get a fresh set of eyes.

“So you’ve seen everything. Well, what do you think?”

Holloway was trying to play it cool, but Watts could sense his nervousness. If DAVID found any discrepancies, it would be hard to argue with him the way it would be another human. Humans made mistakes. Androids didn’t.

DAVID glanced over the documents displayed around the room. Watts wondered if he was withholding his answer for dramatic effect. Then, his gaze met Holloway.

“Your hypothesis is... bold. The audacity of it. Your climate data’s undeniable: The Holocene Epoch was engineered.”

He turned from Holloway to Watts.

“Dr. Watts, your genetic studies are equally conclusive. Pulses of cultural change are harder to prove, but even there your case is strong.”

She wasn’t sure, but she felt like she could see DAVID ever so slightly smile.

“I believe in your Engineers.”

F I V E

“Weyland Industries! Mr. Chance. Ms. Ravel. You remember Dr. Watts.”

Watts had to pause for a moment. One minute, DAVID was leading her and Holloway through one of the Magellan’s many corridors, the next, Holloway was poking his head into a utilitarian sitting room with steel benches and tables bolted to the deck. Watts was beginning to wonder just how frugal the interminably wealthy Weyland was regarding luxuries such as chairs.

Two Weyland Industries technicians sat inside the break room. Andrew Chance was a stocky computer engineer with a genial bearing and a bushy salt-and-pepper mustache. Mona Ravel was a physicist and chemist with severely pulled-back hair and relatively limited composure.

They both wore black bomber jackets with the Weyland logo proudly displayed on their back, and they radiated intelligence and competence.

They were pros, and Holloway was now trying to engage with them like chum in a sea of sharks. The greetings were cold, filling the room with an air of resentment.

Still, Holloway pressed on. “About the materials I gave you. Some of the technical aspects—“

“We’ll handle our end of the job,” Chance replied.

“If there is a job,” Ravel added with a grunt.

Holloway blinked at her, stunned. Chance cleared his throat, attempting to dispel the tension in the room as he explained, “We only have a job if you find something.”

Watts tuned out the rest of the conversation. She didn’t need to hear any more doubt about her capacity to make good of her word. She would make her discovery, the crew would get paid, and they

would spend the rest of their lives wondering why they doubted her.

When she came to, she and Holloway were being led down another steel corridor by DAVID. The tour stopped at their destination, the door to Vickers' cabin. Watts remembered Vickers' standoffish attitude during their first encounter and the shock on her face when she was told she'd be joining the Magellan on its mission; Watts wasn't sure she'd survive round two.

Vickers lived in an open-plan cabin resembling an urban loft apartment. The walls were made of finely crafted, polished industrial steel, the floors were lushly carpeted, and the furniture was opulent—a king-sized bed, mahogany desk, and lavishly furnished dining table.

Then, there was the gleaming machinery, all state-of-the-art technology that ensured Vickers would never need to step outside. There was a private hypersleep freezer, an auto kitchen, and a medical pod. Watts was so awestruck by it that she didn't notice Vickers until they were face to face.

“Is that a Pauling medical pod?” Watts asked. “There's only ten of those things on Earth! I guess nine, now.”

Vickers' eyebrow raised. "I told Mr. Weyland I wouldn't compromise my standard of living. He accommodated me."

As Watts tried to surmise why Weyland would be so insistent on Vickers accompanying them for this mission, Holloway groaned.

"I know, I had to cut my manifest. This used to be the number four cargo bay."

Vickers scowled at Holloway, "What can I do for you, Professor?"

She injected the word 'Professor' with as much venom as the human language would allow. Holloway ignored it. She wasn't the first corporate wasp that tried to intimidate him. He was used to it.

He gestured with the metal slate that rested on his palm.

"We're about to reach the system periphery. I thought you'd want to see the search protocols we--"

"No," She shoved the word into the conversation like a battering ram, practically knocking the wind out of Holloway. "I was set to be the next CEO of Weyland Industries. Then you came along and sold Mr. Weyland on... this. So here I am. Out of the running. I'll go where I'm told. But don't ask me to play along."

"But when you get back..."

Watts' voice drifted. She wasn't sure why she waded into the conversation—why she was trying to diffuse a heated discussion with someone she didn't even understand, let alone respect. As far as Watts was concerned, she'd just poured water onto a grease fire.

Vickers responded in kind, bitterly lamenting, "I'll be five years behind the curve. Out of touch. Over."

"You could make the discovery of the ages," Holloway responded, practically begging her to see the forest for the trees, only to deflate when she gave him a withering stare that a disappointed governess would give to a petulant child.

"You don't believe in what we're doing," He said with a resigned sigh.

Vickers averted her eyes from him, giving a half-hearted "Mr. Weyland believes. That's enough."

With that, the interview was over. As Vickers walked them toward the door, Watts bubbled with rage. She wanted to ask Vickers what it was like to believe in nothing—to be so dead inside that an arbitrary role doled out by an unremarkable man was the only thing worth living for, to have such a tenuous grasp on reality that you could look at your own incredible living conditions and not think they were

enough. But, before she could formulate the words, Vickers spoke up.

“Now we’re out of communication, you can tell the crew what we’re doing.”

Watts’ mouth hung agape with shock.

“They don’t know? They volunteered.”

“They volunteered blind. Classified job, triple pay.”

“Aliens.”

“You shitting me?”

This was not going well. Holloway and Watts stood at the head of the cargo bay, which had been fashioned into an improvised lecture hall. In front of them was a hologram that displayed ancient images of divine visitations—gods and titans towering over mere mortals, inhuman and terrifying.

They were trying to explain their mission to Brick, Glasse, Stillwell, Downs, and Kamarov, all of whom were different shades of spooked. Janek stood at the back of the room, ever the stoic.

“I think all our mythologies are race-memories of the Engineers. Horus the Sun God. Prometheus bringing fire from heaven. A pillar of fire, a pillar of smoke. The Engineers are the gods.”

Watts spotted Kamarov as he stiffened at Holloway's blasphemy.

"The mythology gods maybe. God is God."

"Kamarov," Stillwell interjected. "Let him talk."

But, before Holloway could continue, it was Stillwell's turn to interrupt.

"So we're going to meet these things?"

Watts jumped in. "We probably won't meet anyone. You'd expect a star-traveling race to generate radio or laser signals. Fusion drives and gravity drives have clear signatures. But Zeta Two Reticuli is silent. And the Engineers have gone missing on Earth."

She could see the effect of her words, as Stillwell's tense shoulders seemed to buckle, and his breathing slowed down. It was the perfect opportunity to continue.

"By the pattern, they should've come to Earth seventeen centuries ago. And again six centuries ago. But no sign. After twelve thousand years... they stopped coming."

"Why?" Brick asked, only half expecting an answer.

"Exactly. Why?" Holloway echoed with a smile. Finally, the crew seemed to be getting it. Perhaps, now, they could all finally be on the same page.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

All eyes turned to Janek, sporting an amused grin aimed at Holloway. “Is that the question you’ve come light years to answer?”

Janek’s intent to mock Holloway landed with a thud, as the scientist broadened his shoulders, puffed out his chest, and assumed a perfect posture. His eyes filled with the wonder that came from those who dared to dream as big as humanly possible. Then, he responded.

“Only my first question. I have many.”

The room went dead silent. Suddenly, the crew realized who they were dealing with—a man who wanted to stare God in the eye. Whether or not they agreed with him was a decision they had yet to make. However, at that moment, everyone had come to the same conclusion.

Holloway was not a man to be trifled with.

S I X

Eventually, the Magellan reached the system's periphery, where Zeta Two Reticuli resembled a distant star like Earth's Sun, surrounded by orbiting planets—all distant sparks spattered across the cosmos.

The bridge was rife with activity. Downs, Glasse, and Brick, sat at consoles, entering commands and observing their monitors like hawks. Janek paced in front of the vast bridge window, planning their approach. Footsteps broke his concentration. It was Watts and Holloway, both utterly awestruck by their

first glimpse at deep space. The first reaction to such a sight always told a lot about a person, and Holloway and Watts exuded an earnest appreciation and wonder that brought a grin to Janek's face.

"Welcome to Zeta Two Reticuli. Edge of the system," He announced as he swiveled around to his crewmates.

"Open her eyes."

After a series of keypresses, the bridge filled with the sounds of complex aeronautic mechanisms shifting into place. Two immense telescopes emerged from the ship, irises opening to expose huge lenses. Antennae deployed, unfurling like wings, sifting the vacuum for any whisper of information.

"Overlay," Janek ordered.

A heads-up display appeared, overlaid on the glass of the window. The sun was labeled 'ZETA² RETICULI,' one of an entire array of markers that pointed out the planets and traced the ellipses of their orbits.

Like magic, the planets swelled into colorful orbs, each given their own moniker: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon, Zeta...

Downs was the first to comment. "Seven planets. Two hot rocks, two gas giants, three snowballs. Nothing Earthlike."

Watts turned to Holloway, keeping her burgeoning excitement in check as she tittered on the spot with a shine in her eyes.

“First humans in the system,” She whispered.

Footsteps echoed through the bridge, loud and assertive, like something large had awoken and was now charging toward them with a powerful stride.

Vickers approached Janek, DAVID one step behind.

“Director,” Janek said. “Good of you to join us.”

“What did I miss?” Vickers asked.

“Just getting warmed up.”

Janek turned to Holloway.

“Professor? You know what you want?”

Holloway buzzed with eagerness. He’d been rehearsing this moment for hours.

“EMR scan, thirty hertz to three hundred gigahertz. Spectroscopic passes on every planet and major moon. Infrared and albedo scan for hot spots and light sources.”

“Man knows what he wants. Run it.”

The ship responded in kind, telescopes spinning and zooming while its antennae flexed and focused. Visual spectacle flooded the Magellan’s bridge as its sensors peeled planet Alpha like an onion before putting it back together again. The display flooded

with a river of data, bathing the crew with light in the form of information—chemical compounds, magnetic field lines, lunar orbits, and topographical data.

This continued for each of the planets in the system, providing more information to its utterly captive audience.

“Negative on radio chatter system-wide,” Glasse observed. “Nobody’s talking.”

“Negative for laser and maser,” Brick added.

On the heads-up display, the data stream completed with the last planet, beginning its illumination of the gas giants’ moons.

Glasse continued making observations. “No biological markers. No artificial light. No industry or agriculture. Dead system. Like always.”

“Piss-poor, too. Low in heavy elements,” Downs added.

Brick’s voice cracked as it rose above the others.

“Got a hit! A moon. LV-426.”

The display centered on the planet designated ‘Epsilon,’ a gas giant surrounded by moons. Data flickered around the largest of these satellites.

“Eighty-six percent Earth’s mass,” Brick added. “Atmosphere’s nitrogen, methane, sulfates. Faint returns for a bunch of metals.”

“Anything else?” Holloway asked, ears perked up as he leaned forward. This was a good sign, but he wanted more information. He needed to know for sure that this was the right place. He watched as the sensors completed their pass on the system’s last moon.

“That is all,” Janek answered.

Holloway paused. It was a moment Watts recognized from their time working together—the stage in which the research ended, and it was time to decide on the next step.

He took a deep breath, “Take us in.”

Janek clicked his fingers, “Downs. You heard the man.”

“Aye, Captain. Maneuvering. Eighteen hours to orbit.”

The Magellan retracted its antennae and telescopes. Watts braced herself as the engines fired, and the ship rocketed toward the gas giant Epsilon and its mysterious moon.

LV-426.

It was such a simple name.

The ship’s computer had given it that name, as it was the four-hundred-and-twenty-sixth life-viable celestial body accessible from Earth. Yet, it would be

known for so much more in less than twenty-four hours. Watts couldn't wait to witness it firsthand.

When they left the bridge, Watts noticed Holloway approach DAVID with a playful smile.

"DAVID. Enjoy the show?"

"I don't know that I enjoy things. It was informative."

"It was, it was."

Then, Holloway folded his arms, affecting a puzzled look.

"You know, I've seen more convincing humanoid robots."

At first, Watts felt apprehensive. Who knew how an android would take a ribbing, even as gentle as this? But DAVID appeared unbothered, and she couldn't help but grin at Holloway's sport. It was all just a bit of fun.

"My design's not intended to convince. Simulating humanity is a complex task that diverts resources. My designers dispensed with that burden to optimize for intelligence."

"Why look like a man at all?" Watts blurted, her curiosity at its peak. "Why not be a box on wheels?"

DAVID turned to her with an air of confidence that threw her off. It was subtle, but it felt so... human.

“Being shaped like you, I can use spaces and equipment designed for you. But I’m not so limited. I hear frequencies you can’t hear. I see wavelengths of light invisible to you. I move faster. Exert greater force.”

“You see yourself as a superman,” Watts said, agreeing with the sentiment. Whether DAVID was human or not would be up for debate. But anybody could see that he was undoubtedly a marvel of creation; she could only look on in wonder.

“No,” DAVID responded. “Not a man at all.”

The scientists' cabin strongly contrasted the rest of the Magellan, Watts and Holloway’s furnishings giving the space a warm, maroon hue that wrapped around them like a loving, lingering embrace.

As soon as they were inside, closed off from the rest of the ship, whatever energy their bodies had in reserve was lost to the vacuum of space. So, they lay on Holloway’s makeshift double bed, Watts resting her head on his chest, listening to his heartbeat, absorbing every long, deliberate breath that he took.

“What if they’re really there?”

She wasn’t planning on asking the question. She knew the probability was minimal. It was best to let

that prospect go and focus on what was in front of her.

And yet...

She tilted her head, surprised that Holloway hadn't responded. He was confused, so she elaborated.

"The Engineers. They could be there. Waiting for us. What then?"

Holloway leaned his head back, laughing. Watts wondered whether he'd been thinking about that too.

Eventually, Holloway sighed.

"Then all my dreams come true."

S E V E N

The Magellan arrived, reaching the orbit of LV-426. The gray moon was shrouded in clouds. Its father planet, a lurid gas giant banded in red and gold and half swallowed in darkness, loomed menacingly before it.

The ship reoriented itself, rockets firing continually, nose pointed down—telescopes, sensors, and antennae sprouting once more from the hull.

Everyone had assembled on the bridge. Janek and his crew were seated at their control stations while the others stood on the foredeck. Watts and

Holloway stayed close to one another, Watts' attention diverting from the magnificent cosmic splendor before her for furtive glances at Vickers, DAVID, Chance, and Ravel.

As the Magellan descended, the window filled with thick gray clouds that only penetrated through sporadic flickers of lightning.

"Start with passive systems," Holloway ordered. "We're uninvited guests. Let's be quiet."

Holloway didn't notice, but Watts saw a nervous shiver fire through the others. She found it funny that the notion of first contact engendered such different reactions in people. Of course, she saw the evidence presented before her, and she had no reason not to believe that the Engineers were anything if not benevolent. Why else would they leave a message mapped out in the stars?

Janek nodded at Glasse and Brick, prompting them to study their instruments.

Brick was the first to speak. "A lot of electromag, all random. That's lightning. Going to bugger up our scans."

"Go active," Holloway responded. "Mapping radar."

The ship responded in kind, radar emitters extending from their housing like cannons. There was

a slight rattle as they hammered out a blast of energy. The window display flickered to life, painting the moonscape with data as the wavefront returned, rendering the terrain in a luminous green.

Janek's brow furrowed. "Well, we just rang the doorbell, if anybody's listening."

Kamarov shook his head fearfully, crossing himself.

Holloway would've smiled, but he was too focused on the task at hand as he called out to Brick. "What do we see?"

"Icecaps at the poles. Frozen methane. Cold down there."

The display quivered with a new series of lights—more waves of terrain data sweeping across the moon's surface.

"Terrain data rezzing up," Glasse announced. Then, he jolted.

"Hey! We got hard spots. Radar-opaque. Bright reflections. That's metal."

Another shiver bolted through everyone in the room, but Watts could sense the fear slowly shifting into excitement. The crew seemed to slowly resign themselves to the fact that there was no going back. It made more sense to adopt Holloway's hope for the

best than to kill oneself with the stress of expecting the worst.

Satellites launched from the Magellan—metal motes hurled into polar orbits around the moon. Twenty-four hard spots appeared on the display, depicting an irregular array as they circled LV-426.

“That’s not natural,” Holloway surmised.

“You see stuff like that sometimes. Mineral deposits. Volcanic ejecta.” The response came from one of Janek’s crew that had yet to introduce themselves. He was bright and fresh-faced, his name tag reading ‘Milburn.’ Watts guessed from his reserved nature that he was almost as new to these interstellar endeavors as she was—finally getting to put a lot of learned theory into practice.

“Big one there,” Glasse added, pointing to a new signal on the map that glowed brighter than the others.

“Still quiet?” Holloway asked.

“No comm signals,” Brick responded. “No signs of life.”

Holloway nodded pensively. “I want to get below the clouds.”

The Magellan’s descent onto LV-426 was turbulent. The prospecting ship barreled through

buffeting gray clouds, its telescopes and antennae stowed away, the hull streaming vapor as it cut the atmosphere, lightning flashing and booming around it.

Everybody was now strapped in, save for Janek, who stood far too casually for somebody bearing the wrath of space travel as he gripped a stanchion, boots planted on the deck.

The sensations were overwhelming for Watts, from the roar of the landing engines, the screaming wind over the hull, the whips of mist across the bridge window obscuring any view—she didn't realize just how tightly she was gripping Holloway's hand until she saw him wince in the corner of her eye. Judging from his pale, sweat-drenched face, he wasn't enjoying the drop either.

Watts had to remind herself to perform the tricks that had helped her overcome her fears of air travel back home. She observed the relatively calm demeanor of her colleagues, reminding herself that they were professionals who had done this before.

Eventually, her efforts paid off. The Magellan broke through the cloud cover into clear air. As the ship stabilized, she looked at the environment below and wished it was more inviting. It was a vast and eerie landscape, with broad valleys mottled with thin

dark ground cover, barren crags, and rock spires. The surface was waterless and wind-swept.

It was grim and foreign country, and the sight of it brought a churn to her stomach.

Janek assumed control of the ship, effortlessly taking the helm as it thundered over valleys and ridges.

“Coming up on site seven,” Glasse announced as casually as one would making a food order, as if he didn’t spend the last ten minutes hurtling through space in a pressurized tin can.

The Magellan crested a mountain that had to be higher than Everest, surveying a dry barren plain. Watts noticed the scattered rocky peaks that arose from the desert floor like an alien Monument Valley.

“Nothing,” Downs noted to the rest of the crew.

Holloway was unconvinced, pointing to a smaller mountain peak.

“Look there.”

Suddenly, the Magellan lurched sideways. Watts whipped her head to Janek to see him slightly tilting the controls—this was supposed to happen. She needed to calm down.

The ship circled the mount before them, its nose pointing inward. The crew observed the dark structure glittering like coal, noting the seemingly

incompatible combination of flat faces and clean edges marred by cracks and wear.

“Are we recording?” Holloway continued.

Glasse nodded irritably. Of course they were recording.

Watts shifted her gaze to Vickers, surprised that Weyland’s director was nonplussed at the pyramidal peak. Perhaps there were even hints of belief. Maybe she was starting to see eye to eye with Holloway after all.

Creators or not, the Engineers had provided them with at least one miracle.

So, Watts decided to scan the data readouts. “Tungsten, tantalum, aluminum. That could be technology.”

“Let’s see the next one,” Holloway responded.

The Magellan purred over the landscape to a second oddly regular peak that was even more decrepit than the first. It sat on the brink of a vast canyon, whose edges had been eaten by landslides. The ship dropped between the canyon walls to circle the mount.

Holloway and Watts stared at the structure. She could feel the air between them shifting. The euphoria from all of these new stimuli was wearing off. They were thinking purely like scientists again.

“Identical,” Watts surmised. “Apart from weathering.”

“Could be a rock formation. Carbon crystallizes like that,” Milburn nervously tittered, unsurprised when Holloway and Watts ignored him.

Instead, Holloway gave a satisfied nod. Watts could feel his anticipation. They were closing in.

“Let’s see the big one.”

Watts felt utmost respect for Janek as she watched him pilot the Magellan through instruments alone. The man had a passion for helmsmanship.

The ship was enveloped in thick, dark clouds that, on Earth, would threaten a vengeful storm. She wondered if they were the same sort of harbinger on LV-426. How would a severe storm conduct itself on a completely foreign moon in a different sector of space? Hopefully, there was someone on the crew well-versed in extraterrestrial meteorology.

The ship descended into clear air before Watts could think about storms any further. A stunning panorama unfolded before the crew: craters hundreds of meters across, connected by trenches like a pattern of crop circles sunk in the rock.

In the middle of the central crater, a massive angular peak stood more prominent than the others.

The Magellan circled the site, bathing in its awe-inspiring yet cryptic aura.

Watts smiled, enraptured. They'd found the Engineer equivalent of where X marked the spot. She glanced at Holloway, who sported the same bright grin, eyes shining.

The crew's skepticism was leaving even faster. They shook their heads and exchanged looks, but Watts could tell they were struggling to come up with a quick and logical explanation. This structure wasn't logical.

"No radio. No heat sources. Cold as the grave."

It was Brick, no doubt looking to restore some sense to the confused people around him. His words did little to affect Holloway, who simply shrugged.

"Nobody home."

Watts looked out at the timeworn peak, noting its eroding facets.

"I don't think anybody's been home for a long time."

The Magellan approached the central crater, where four canals extended outward like points on a compass. Some connected to smaller craters, while one in particular petered out flush with the desert floor.

Janek maneuvered the ship to the end of the canal—approximately half a kilometer from the central crater. The crew gathered by the window, staring down the wide straight canal at the distant pyramidal peak.

Holloway was the first to avert his eyes, turning to the rest of the crew with a hearty “All right. Let’s move.”

Yet, there wasn’t movement. Even if they were starting to believe, the others weren’t ready to barrel out into the great unknown. Instead, Janek glanced at his instruments.

“There’s only six hours of daylight left. Maybe you should hold off.”

Watts couldn’t help herself. This man casually conquered space travel, yet he was hesitant now. It made no sense to her. She pointed out at the towering spire.

“You’ve got that outside the windows and you want to wait ‘til tomorrow?”

E I G H T

The expedition party emerged from the Magellan's airlocks, riding Weyland Industries branded cargo rovers. These vehicles were loaded with a mountain of gear, with the explorers riding on running-board seats in their space suits.

Holloway drove the first rover, Watts sitting beside him, and Stillwell, Kamarov, and Downs in the back. The second rover was driven by DAVID, with Milburn, Chance, and Ravel aboard. Hunched over next to Milburn was another Magellan crew member that Watts had yet to meet personally. His name was

Fifield, and while his haggard appearance suggested a devil-may-care attitude, his demeanor was reserved and soft-spoken. The way he chatted with Milburn suggested they knew each other. Perhaps they'd even volunteered together for this very mission.

The ride on the cargo rover was not smooth, as its wheels bounced on the uneven terrain. Adding to the discomfort was that they were in alien territory, which meant that anything could happen.

So, Watts took it upon herself to talk to them, to assume the role of the calm and calculated person, and to try to make everything about this journey feel as regular and routine as possible—at least for now.

“The air here will kill you, so keep an eye on your supply and watch your seals. Pathogen tests are clean,” she reminded them in a matter-of-fact tone. These men had traveled to space before. Oxygen monitoring had become a regular part of their job. This was no different. Perhaps reminding them of that would help ease some of that tension.

“Move slowly,” Holloway called over his shoulder, keeping his eyes on the road ahead. “Stay together. Don't touch anything. Things may be more fragile than they look—or more dangerous. There might be technologies operating here we don't understand.”

None of what Holloway said was wrong, but Watts saw the effect it had on the men before her and wondered if he could have phrased it with a little more tact. That wasn't his style, though, especially when it came to work. Besides, they had less than six hours to make their discovery and return to the ship. There wasn't time for coddling.

Both rovers followed a gaping trench that grew deeper as it stretched toward the central crater. The further they traveled, the more Watts found herself drawn to the pyramidal peak, framed in front of them like a monument on a triumphal avenue. She passed the time by imagining setting foot back on Earth with divine knowledge to impart—the subsequent utopia she would help build. She pictured an egalitarian society where everybody had their material needs met without question. Would the Engineers make such a reality possible? Probably not. But, in those brief moments, Watts was allowed to dream.

When she returned to reality, the rover crossed a perpendicular canal flanked by smaller craters with central peaks. A gargantuan shadow settled over them, belonging to a high promontory of stone situated atop one bank of the canal. Watts could feel her spacesuit adjust to the sudden drop in temperature, buzzing to keep her warm.

The floor of the central crater was a vast enclosed plain. The pyramidal mount loomed in the center, magnificent in its colossal scale. The rovers trailed plumes of dust as they circled the pyramid, looking for signs of entry.

Eventually, they stopped at the south face, which featured an iris door of many blades that stood a jaw-dropping fifty feet high. This massive construction was seemingly made of the same basaltic stone as the pyramid itself.

“Tell me that’s a natural formation,” Holloway hollered as he greeted the rest of the team with a satisfied grin. “Undeniable proof of alien civilization. You were here on this day, thirty-one December, year of our Lord 2172. History will remember your names.”

Watts didn’t pay attention to the speech. She didn’t need to. She was a believer from the start. Instead, she stared at the iris, noting that its bottom-most blade was broken and lying in rubble at the foot of the door. A dark, knife-like aperture led into the pyramid.

“The door’s open,” She announced.

Vickers and Janek stood statuesque as they observed the holographic display on the Magellan’s

bridge, Holloway's tinny voice echoing over the comm link. Lines of light that formed the huge iris door in the pyramid filled the window.

"Son of a bitch. They were right," Janek broke the silence as he turned away from the display, looking at the very real pyramid peak that stood in the distance, teasing the potential alien activity inside.

Once Janek was distracted, Vickers turned and slipped out of the bridge, hurrying away. Her destination was her suite, where she strode through her quarters toward a small pair of doors on the far wall. At first, she stepped through the one on the left, entering a luxurious bathroom with minimalist features. She met her gaze in the spotless rectangular mirror, noting her fierce determination as she washed a pill down with a tumbler of water. She wasn't prepared for this. She was expecting the scientists to fail, for their hypothesis to be wrong—for all of this to be a gigantic waste of time.

Hell had frozen over.

She returned to her quarters, squeezing through the second door into a chamber walled with steel panels. A deep hum of ventilation and power heralded the complex technology that filled this room. She struggled to remember the exact protocol for this scenario. The broad strokes were there, but the details

needed to be filled in. As she turned to a console beside the door, flipped a row of switches, and listened to the hidden mechanisms stir to life, she felt a thrill that had eluded her for years.

In the time she spent on Earth perfecting every procedure, she'd forgotten the joy of improvisation.

Holloway and Watts led the explorers into the pyramid through the iris door. They were met with harrowing darkness, their flashlights barely cutting into the suffocating gloom. The rovers autonomously followed, their six-wheeled chassis with independent suspension trundling over the rubble barrier with the sure-footing of mountain-traversing goats.

Their journey led to a cavernous antechamber, where the explorers navigated a bare cathedral space, their eyes raking the walls.

"Jocelyn. Here," Holloway trembled with urgency as he shined a light on the rock. Watts followed the beam to find symbols engraved on the stone surface; dots, lines, and arcs.

"The writing of the Engineers," He continued. "Conclusive connection."

DAVID stepped beside him, scanning the alien writing with his artificial eyes.

"Congratulations, Professor Holloway."

Watts shone her light over the text with a perfectly steady hand, letting the device in her hand record it for later study.

Once she was done, the exploring party moved on, eager for the next significant discovery.

The pyramid's interior continued to be a labyrinth with corridors as big as railway tunnels that intersected and diverged. Several of the crew were carrying units with holographic displays rendering three-dimensional maps that expanded the further they explored.

They traveled deeper into the complex, the sounds of the surface having long drowned out, replaced by the whine and growl of the cargo rovers. Watts could sense DAVID trailing them, continuing to scan the walls as though he understood the language of the Engineers. As DAVID passed his hand through the air, like he was grasping a cobweb, Watts wondered just how much he understood, and what he wasn't telling them.

Then, a strange rumbling noise sounded down the corridor, causing everybody to freeze. As it traveled from one end of the corridor to the other, fading into a faint echo, everybody thought the same thing.

This was it. First contact.

The sound returned—a deep, layered, demonic voice that spoke in an unearthly language.

Watts turned to Holloway, hoping he could give her that confident look that assuaged all fear. Instead, his eyes focused on the impenetrable plume of shadow ahead. He was afraid.

Still, he moved forward.

Nobody followed as his footsteps crunched against the stone. Nervous glances were exchanged. Words were muttered, whispered, choked back down.

Part of Watts wanted to return to the ship. That part guided her decision, which was to follow Holloway. They'd come too far to turn back now, especially when their only obstacle was a sound. If Watts bailed now, she would never have forgiven herself.

As she approached Holloway, step by shaky step, she could hear the footsteps behind her. The rest of the crew thought the same thing.

Her light bounced off the back of Holloway's suit, announcing his position. He stood perfectly still. Watts squinted her eyes, curious as to why he wasn't moving.

A burst of light forced its way through her eyelids as an apparition formed before them—a pale,

luminous giant stood fifteen feet tall with hollow eyes and a grotesque snout. It took gigantic strides toward them, filling the caverns with a strong, sonorous voice that felt to Watts like an arm reaching down her throat and settling in her stomach.

She could feel her legs buckle as she backpedaled involuntarily. Holloway stood his ground, facing the apparition like it was Goliath and he had prepared that fateful stone.

“Martin,” Watts desperately called out. “Martin!”

He did not budge, and she immediately knew why. Martin Holloway was many things, including fascinated to a fault. The man would have stared down a natural disaster if he felt there was something to learn.

The rest of the team weren’t so bold, scattering into the refuge of the darkness—all except DAVID, who remained.

Watts watched in horror as the apparition reached Holloway. Bracing herself for the moment of impact, she told herself that she could do more, even though she knew full well that her body couldn’t move.

Then, that moment came, and the creature brought its mighty foot down into the stone, right where Holloway was standing. He was bathed in light

as the creature didn't break its stride, continuing down the cavern.

Watts rushed to Holloway's side. He was perfectly okay, as though the creature had simply passed through him. She turned to see that the colossus had disappeared, and the crew was slowly returning, rattled with shell shock.

"Christ. Christ!" Milburn cried.

"It wasn't real," Ravel gasped.

"We all saw it!"

Then, Watts noticed that DAVID made the same kind of gesture he had done before, in which he appeared to bat away a cobweb. Had he noticed something? He mentioned that he could see in frequencies that they could not.

The corridor started to rumble yet again. Watts turned as the apparition reappeared, bounding toward them. She took her place by Holloway's, both standing their ground as the ghostly giant towered over them, surrounding them with pillars of concentrated light. Sure enough, it passed over them harmlessly and disappeared with a crackle.

Holloway turned to Watts with the same kind of awe one reserved for extravagant fireworks displays.

"Recording?"

“No more. I’m out,” Fifield announced as he kicked up a mound of dirt.

Holloway turned to face him.

“Fifield. Get a grip.”

“I’m a prospector. You find a load of bauxite, I’m your man. But not this.”

Holloway turned to Milburn, silently pleading that he calm his friend down.

Milburn shrugged, “I should go with him. Buddy system.”

Of course. They were afraid. Watts couldn’t blame them, but Holloway certainly seemed to as he scowled with disgust.

“Fine.”

He marched to one of the cargo rovers, hauling a heavy rolling case from its gear compartment and carefully sliding it onto the ground. He wanted to convey his disappointment, but not at the expense of their equipment.

Once it was settled, he pointed to Fifield and Milburn.

“You can deploy the drones. Drop them in the first or second nexus on your way back.”

“Give us a rover,” Fifield coughed, trying and failing to add an air of authority to his demand.

Holloway shook his head, “And half our gear? It’s no more than a mile. You can walk it.”

Fifield’s eyes flickered between the case, Milburn, and Holloway. Watts could see his body fill with doubt. Perhaps he’d made the wrong call. Maybe he’d caused unnecessary trouble that would come back to bite him in the ass later.

Or, maybe he just put himself and Fifield in danger by practically volunteering to separate from the group.

Milburn clearly had the same thought, sulking as he took the rolling case. But, it was too late. They made their decision, and they had to live with it. With that, both Milburn and Fifield backtracked, the rest of the ground crew watching as they disappeared down the yawning caverns.

The team eventually reached a massive door, sealed completely airtight. From its unfathomable scale and the intricate design adorned on its surface, this door led somewhere important.

Holloway glanced at his holo-map.

“This should lead to the core of the pyramid.”

“Jack it open? Or cut through?” Watts asked.

“Let’s do as little damage as we can,” Holloway responded.

Ravel stepped forward, waving a sensor over the wall. Her eyes widened as she observed the readings.

“There’s power. Current flowing in the wall.”

Chance joined her, inspecting the door’s frame.

“Maybe we can hack it. Has to be a mechanism...”

DAVID shifted slightly, prompting Watts’ attention. She was the only one to spot him as he eyed the group with the slightest hint of an expression that mixed amusement with exasperation, as though they were missing something obvious.

Watts wanted to call him out, like a schoolteacher asking a distracted student to share their thoughts with the class. However, before she could, he pointed to a spot on the wall beside the massive slab.

“Pull up a rover. I want to get up there.”

Janek wasn’t sure how long he’d been standing at the window on the Magellan’s bridge, staring down the prolonged canal at the distant pyramid.

The ship’s powerful imaging systems continued to stream data, with stereoscopic feeds from the explorers’ flashlights drawing the maze under the pyramid in light as they explored. A globe of LV-426

bloomed with terrain and weather logistics as the satellites fed the ship information.

In the reflection, Janek spotted Vickers standing behind him, arms folded as she peered over his shoulder.

“Director. Taking an interest?”

He turned to face her, noting the way her lips pursed in response. He was used to dealing with corpo types like this across his career. They thought they were so slick and bent backward to hide any strong emotions. He could tell that she wanted to snap back that he should mind his own fucking business. To these people, strong emotions suggested weakness and invited suspicion toward the ulterior motives they always had. That was an unspoken rule amongst the workers; only fools take jobs and think they’re being told the whole story.

So, he wasn’t surprised when her lips coiled ever so slightly into a smirk, and she calmly responded “It’s my operation, isn’t it?”

Fifield had been his best friend for years. But, in this particular moment, Milburn wanted nothing more than to punch him in his stupid face. In fact, the only thing stopping him from doing so was that Fifield had the foresight to bring a map.

He hated this—he hated being away from the rest of the group, his brain firing at every sound, yelling at him to flee. He hated lugging around the heavy drone case as his tired muscles cried in pain. He just wanted to be back on the ship.

No. Fuck that. He wanted to be back home.

The duo trudged into a junction where multiple passageways converged. That had to be a nexus point.

“What do you think?” Fifield asked.

“Grand Central Station,” Milburn muttered as he laid the drone case on the ground, sliding the lid open. Spheres the size of softballs tumbled out, studded with lenses and sensors. They were autonomous camera probes.

As Milburn got to his feet, the probes lit up as they awakened. They dispersed, rolling in all directions to investigate the different passageways. Usually, Milburn would be amused at how they bumbled into walls and pillars before reversing and continuing their exploration. Now, he was just glad that it was done.

“Let’s check the feed,” Fifield said.

Milburn nodded, and then Fifield continued.

“Gimme the map.”

Milburn recoiled. If this was a joke, it really wasn’t funny.

“You had the map unit,” Milburn responded, his voice shaking. It wouldn’t make sense if Fifield didn’t have the map. That would suggest that they were ignorantly following each other—they were walking in a random direction without even realizing it!

“You don’t have the map?” Fifield squeaked.

They stared at each other.

“Are you serious?” Milburn jabbed. If Fifield didn’t have the map, why the fuck didn’t he carry the drones? He was the reason they were stuck with them in the first place!

Fifield sheepishly shrugged, prompting Milburn to turn and trudge back the way they came with a loud groan.

“Come on.”

DAVID stood atop one of the cargo rovers, having cut a hole in the wall beside the door. The explorers below watched as he worked with probes inside the mechanism.

“Looks like a three-state switch.”

BOOM! A sound echoed inside the ancient walls. However, nothing moved. Whatever DAVID was doing, it seemed to be working.

“One moment...”

With a tilt of his head, DAVID shifted one of the controls.

BOOM!

The immense door began to rise, revealing a tremendous space on the other side—the vast central chamber of the pyramid.

Holloway took point, ducking under the door as soon as there was enough room, surveying the space with his flashlight. Watts followed him inside, everybody else waiting a second before following suit.

A colossal structure stood in the center of the chamber, a strange and convoluted mechanism surrounded by yawning chasms in the floor, the depths of which were lost to darkness.

Watts' gaze followed the shape of the structure, and she found herself looking up at the pyramid's apex, where a shaft of diffused light penetrated the pyramid.

“This is something, now,” she heard Ravel say behind her.

“Yes,” DAVID concurred. “Yes, it is.”

The way he said that struck Watts as yet another hint that he was recognizing something they didn't. He seemed to read meaning in the inscrutable structures all around them.

A thud jolted her. Holloway hauled a drone case out of the rover and released its contents. Two dozen spherical drones tumbled out, burst to life, and rolled off into the dark, nimbly hopping curbs and skirting chasms.

Then, a beep caught Watts' attention. It was her atmosphere sensor. She outstretched her hand to check it.

"Martin," she gasped in astonishment. "This air's breathable."

The light at the peak intensified, perfectly centering and filling the pyramid. Watts deduced that it had to be the sun moving into alignment. This architectural marvel was created to take full advantage of the surrounding environment.

A vast sigh filled the gigantic space, as if the pyramid itself was breathing. Watts felt a slight tap against her still-extended hand, where a tiny pool of water formed on the back of her glove. She looked up, wondering where it came from.

She flinched as a drop of water hit her square in the visor. Before she could collect her thoughts, rain filled the pyramid. The water kicked up petrichor as it trickled into the chasms, inundating the mossy growths that clung to the walls.

Holloway gave a cheer as he turned to Watts.

“Miracles and wonders!”

The shaft of light then moved on, and the core chamber dimmed slightly. The rainfall stopped as suddenly as it started.

The explorers followed the main path around the periphery of the chamber, passing a gallery of incomprehensible machines. Cells in the dark apparatus opened on startling deposits of color—translucent alabaster flutes, honeycombs of pure gold, matrices of crystal.

Watts waved her scanner as she walked.

“Intense field readings. Huge power sources here.”

They arrived at a wide opening on the floor. A strange ramp curved downward, its floor segmented and sawtoothed. It was baffling, as it wasn’t a staircase or an escalator. It had no moving parts, rails, or tracks.

“Space below us,” Holloway observed. “A big space.”

As the group stared in bewilderment, unsure of how to proceed, one of the probes bumbled up to the opening and bounded down the ramp.

“How does this work?” Watts laughed as she watched the brave little probe push onward. Perhaps, they needed to follow it.

So, she stepped out, descending the ramp on foot. She could hear footsteps behind her. The others must be following. She didn’t turn to look. Her concentration was reserved solely for the path ahead. The passage was steep, and she felt she could lose footing with each step.

Yet, she reached the bottom, where the ramp ended at a lower passage. As she found her footing, she could hear the cargo rover trundle down after her.

“Ravel. Chance. Where’ve you gone?” Holloway called out. “DAVID! Where are you?”

Indignant, he turned to Watts.

“They didn’t come down!”

Perhaps Ravel and Chance were afraid, like Fifield and Milburn before them. But, DAVID wasn’t. What reason did he have for staying behind?

Whatever. He was probably tending to Ravel and Chance, making sure they were okay. That was his duty. Androids always did their duty. Watts was transfixed by an archway that stood before her.

“Look.”

She walked in, Holloway following.

It led to a passageway punctuated by alcoves as big as band-shells. In each alcove stood a biomechanical apparatus shaped from the same dark material as the rest of the pyramid. Each apparatus implied with its design that a giant was meant to fit inside it.

“Do you see, the size of them?” She asked Holloway. “Like that ghost we saw...”

“It wasn’t a ghost,” He replied. “Where are the others? I don’t want to go back up.”

Watts used her free hand to calibrate her suit’s comm controls, listening for any hints of activity. A few button presses, and she could hear Stillwell, Kamarov, and Downs mumbling to one another.

“They switched to channel three. I hear them talking. They’re okay.”

Holloway nodded. “We should stay together.”

Holloway and Watts slowed across the concourse, playing their lights over the ominous machinery. Watts was unnerved by how much louder their footsteps were in this space. If it housed giants, she didn’t feel comfortable announcing her presence to them.

Milburn was at wit's end as he watched Fifield bumble through the dark.

“This is not the same place,” He groaned.

“It is!” Fifield whined. “That is the same freaky thing we saw before.”

Fifield pointed to a detail of the architecture, one geometric anomaly in a sea of them. He had no idea what he was talking about. Milburn was dealing with a child.

“No it’s not! The other one was more... sort of... fuck it.”

He frustratedly tapped his comms, anticipating the smug lecture he was probably going to get on the ship. Holloway would have a field day, getting to lay into the non-believer.

“Milburn to Magellan. Come in.”

There was only one response.

Static.

N I N E

Holloway and Watts reached an intersection among the caverns, turning the corner only to stop dead in their tracks. Watts could hear Kamarov, Stillwell, and Downs almost run into her. She didn't respond. She didn't care. Something infinitely more important lay before her.

It was a conquered giant that stood fifteen feet tall but was now on its back. It had a rough humanoid shape and a barrel chest. Its withered, gaunt flesh had fused with bulky protrusions that Watts couldn't yet

identify. Was this a part of the creature's body or some kind of equipment?

Was this an Engineer?

Their flashlights reached the top of its neck, where a stump of brown dried blood and strips of decayed gore greeted them. Its head was nearby, lolled to one side. The eyes were seemingly covered by goggles, wide spherical lenses fused to its skull. An elephantine proboscis stood near its hip, Watts surmising it must have connected somehow.

The more they lingered, the more macabre the display. The corpse wasn't just lying there. It was contorted in a convulsion of agony. Its jaw gaped in a silent scream that was no doubt caused by the hideous tapestry of wounds on its body—slashes that cut through bone.

For the first time, that dread that wafted through the crew had finally reached Watts.

"God in heaven," whimpered Kamarov.

"Martin," was all that Watts could muster.

"Martin."

"I know," Holloway replied. "Look."

He lifted his flashlight to reveal what stood beyond the dead giant.

It was a vision of hell.

A dozen dead engineers were heaped against a sealed door, twisted in postures of torment, murdered in an attempt to escape. Each of them bore the same horrific wounds.

This pyramid was the site of an ancient massacre. If these were the Engineers—if this was the race that brought humanity to the next stage of evolution, what was capable of killing them like this?

Holloway approached the decapitated Engineer.

“There were giants in the Earth in those days... and when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, they bare children to them, who became mighty men.”

He turned to the rest of the crew.

“Genesis six four.”

Then, he reverently placed a gloved hand on the deceased giant’s ribs. Downs jumped, eyes bulging.

“You said don’t touch anything! You said don’t touch anything!”

Holloway raised his hand, fingers outstretched.

“Peace.”

Downs shook his head, mortified. “The size of them!”

Holloway nodded, “In all the old mythologies, the visitors from the sky were giants.”

Watts joined Holloway beside the dead Engineer, also compelled to touch it. The flesh had ossified and was now as hard as stone. She traced the wounds with a finger.

“They were killed. All of them.”

“We shouldn’t be here,” Downs muttered.

That prompted a groan from Holloway, “Come on. The dead can’t hurt you.”

He adjusted his communicator.

“DAVID. Chance. Ravel. I’ve got something here.”

There was no response. Watts folded her arms, trying to hide the unease as her gaze fixated on the dead titans before her.

“Communications are going to hell.”

Janek was irritated. He understood why Watts wanted to conduct her investigation as soon as possible. The prospect of discovery had a habit of not going away, settling in your insides, and eating away until you indulged it or went mad.

But, the window display suggested a raging storm was brewing, its lightning-laced front rolling across the surface of LV-426 like a tidal wave. He noticed the rising winds as they plucked at the ground cover outside.

This was gonna be a rough one.

“All hands. Back to the ship. We got a mean storm front rolling in. I repeat. All hands-”

The response came almost immediately. It was from Holloway, his voice distorted and filtered through crushed static.

“We’ve found something here! I’m not walking away for bad weather.”

Janek exasperatedly rubbed his temples. Now, he knew how his superiors felt when he used to defy orders.

“Holloway! I’ve got two-hundred-kilometer winds with airborne silica and enough static to fry your suits. Get your asses back here! Now!”

Holloway was bitter. To be so close to a breakthrough, only to have it snatched away by the unfeeling circumstance of the weather, had a slight effect on his morale.

But he had a crew to consider, and he needed to ensure their safety. So, he raced the cargo rover away from the pyramid, surrounded by a spectacle of dust kicked up by the wheels. Watts sat in the back, securing a bulky payload under a tarp on the cargo deck. She looked uncomfortable but was nowhere near as miserable as Stillwell, Downs, and Kamarov.

Behind them, the vengeful storm front gave chase, eager to swallow them up. They dared to test the elements, and it was going to retaliate with gale-force winds and lashes of lightning.

It was long before the chase was reaching its end. Holloway could see the Magellan on the horizon, the airlock lift sliding open and hissing with hydraulic pressure release to reveal DAVID, Chance, and Ravel. He didn't slow down. He couldn't.

Holloway roared into the lift. He told himself that the equipment would be okay. It was a calculated assumption. He slammed the rover's brakes, skidding to the opposite wall. Watts leaped from the vehicle as it came to a stop.

"Help me unload!" She ordered the men as she rushed to the rover's cargo.

The storm wall caught up to them. They struggled to stay upright as screaming winds ripped around them, dust filling their vision. Watts gave the tarp a sharp pull. It tore halfway free. With just one more tug, they could unpack the gear.

She didn't notice the tarp filling with wind until it snapped taut with harrowing violence.

"Jocelyn!"

It was Holloway. That was the last thing Watts heard as she was hurled into the storm. She tumbled

helplessly, her limbs useless as a wall of invisible hands grabbed at her, trying to tear through her suit and rip her apart. Pain coiled around her ribs and forced the air out of her chest as she crashed into a metal stanchion, her body wrapping around it. She clung for dear life—the only form of resistance she had. She wasn't an expert on the LV-426 ecosystem, but she assumed that the storm wasn't going to pass soon. She needed a plan. Her muscles and joints were starting to ache, her grip strength waning. She would be pulled back into the wind if she didn't do something soon.

CLANG! More pain. Her ribs rattled as the stanchion jolted from the metal mass that slammed into it. Watts tried to focus through the dust that plagued her vision, hoping this new object that shared the stanchion with her could help somehow. It owed her that much.

Then, an arm burst out, planting itself on her shoulder with a firm grip. A face peered up at her—a blank expression with determined eyes.

It was DAVID.

Watts watched in mute astonishment as he locked her spacesuit to his. He wrapped an arm around her body, holding her close as they sped through the storm. The high-pitched whir of his tether

accompanied the bellowing roar of the furious hurricane.

Once her feet were back on the steel floor of the Magellan lift, Watts could feel her legs as they readied to fail her. Then she found herself in Holloway's arms, burying her head in his shoulder, her whiplash-induced psyche ready to break.

Stillwell, Downs, and Kamarov gave them space, bundling the rover's tarp-wrapped cargo with workmanlike efficiency.

The inside of the airlock was a much-needed sanctuary for Watts. Without the cacophonous tempest roaring in her ears, and the wind throwing her around like a ragdoll, she could finally calm herself down.

She took deep breaths as she slid out of her spacesuit, fighting her body's urge to break down and throw her to the floor. She needed to get to her quarters, where she could rest properly.

She could feel DAVID's eyes on her from the other side of the airlock, wordlessly checking that she was okay. She met his gaze, tears forming as she tried not to burst with gratitude. Instead, she mouthed a silent 'Thank you.' He responded with the barest of nods, before vanishing into the ship.

“Day one,” She heard Holloway announce. Now that the crew was safe inside the ship, they didn’t need to be uncertain or scared. They could appreciate the splendor and intrigue of what they’d seen.

“Got to hand it to you, professor. You were right,” Downs declared, clapping Watts on the shoulder with an amicable lightness that still threatened to bowl her over. “Both of you.”

“What’s in the tarp? What did you bring back?” The questions came from Chance, who eyed their payload with curiosity.

Watts and Holloway exchanged looks with Stillwell, Kamarov, and Downs. Where would they even start with such a question? How should one begin to explain what was inside that pyramid?

Instead, they burst into good laughter.

“You don’t want to know,” Watts wheezed.

“Shit,” Stillwell interjected, all eyes in the room shifting to him. “We’re two helmets short.”

Everyone turned to the lockers, where two remained closed.

Milburn and Fifield. Their helmet racks were empty.

“They didn’t come in,” Kamarov replied.

A sober silence settled over the crew. Of course it hadn’t gone as smoothly as they’d hoped. Yet, hope

was all they had. They could only hope that Fifield and Milburn were okay.

Wherever they were.

Janek spoke urgently into the communicator, hoping that the two on the other end were listening.

“Between the wind speeds and the static electricity, there’s no safe way to get to you. You’re going to have to hunker down until it passes. How are your provisions?”

At first, there was no response, which irked Janek. These jackasses had already gotten themselves in this vulnerable position by not paying attention. One would think they’d finally get the message by now.

Then, Fifield responded, trying to yell through the static.

“We got air... water and food tabs... suits.”

“Honey stacks?” Janek responded.

Peeing in space suits was an uncomfortable, downright intrusive experience. But, since the alternative was whipping one’s dick out and exposing it to the elements and atmosphere of a foreign planet, honey sacks had to do.

“Yeah, we’re piped,” Fifield bitterly responded.

“I hate these fucking things,” Milburn added, his voice muffled in the background.

“We hate these fucking... Captain,” Fifield reiterated, in case Janek hadn’t heard him.

“Maybe next time you’ll mind your maps,” Janek scolded with a grunt. “Keep your heads down. We’ll come get you in the morning.”

That set Fifield off. Janek wondered what profanities were being hurled at him over their broken communication. Unfortunately, the storm had scrambled Fifield’s response into an unintelligible garble.

There was only one response Janek could give back.

“Magellan out.”

T E N

Watts tried not to think about Fifield and Milburn as the Magellan's mess hall buzzed with excitement. It wasn't as though they were in any immediate danger. They just had to lay low until they could be picked up in the morning.

Now, it was time to celebrate. The remaining crew had assembled, gathering around Janek as he rested a squeeze box against his chest, filling the air with an archaic, folksy tune. The men swayed with a hint of exaggerated mockery, too exhausted to dance.

Holloway held a champagne bottle in each hand, filling steel cups left and right.

“My friends. What we do here marks the greatest achievement of our species. Contact with another civilization. Humanity came of age today, on this moon. You were there.”

He planted the bottles on the floor, picked up his own glass, and raised it with a reverent smile.

“To history.”

The crew followed suit, raising their glasses and drinking. The only holdout was Janek, who seized the silence and made another toast.

“To Milburn and Fifield. The first human beings to freak out, get lost, and sleep in their suits in the ruins of an alien civilization.”

The room erupted into laughter, signaling to Watts that everything was alright. If the rest of the Magellan wasn't worried about Milburn and Fifield's safety, why should she shoulder that burden? If Janek was confident they'd be okay, who was she to question him?

Milburn followed Fifield with a cruel amusement, watching him grope his way through the darkness as their flashlights slowly ebbed. He'd long given up on trying to find an opening that led to the

outside, the storm taunting him with how closely it howled outside.

He also gave up on trying to convince Fifield to stop. He wanted nothing more than to settle for the night and try and get some sleep. He already stranded them inside an alien cave in the middle of nowhere. The least he could do was make the night go quicker.

Yet, Fifield insisted on continuing to make their lives difficult.

Eventually, Milburn had to ask.

“What are you looking for?”

Fifield paused to answer, before continuing to feel his way across the wall.

“Someplace things can’t come at us.”

Milburn rolled his eyes. Even after the constant humiliation, Fifield was still paranoid.

“What’s gonna come at us?” Milburn asked. At first, the question was facetious—a way to mock his friend’s apparently neverending cowardice. But then he recalled the ghost and wondered if something more flesh and blood was waiting for them.

DAVID didn’t breathe, but Vickers felt like he was breathing down her neck as she sat by the holography terminal in her quarters. She was eternally grateful to Weyland for her career

progression, but a part of her missed working with flesh-and-blood humans.

People were clumsy, sycophantic little worms that liked to think they were smarter than they actually were. For Vickers, spotting ulterior motives was easy. Her coworkers had tics and habits. They could be bargained with, manipulated, even seduced if the situation called for it. It was only a matter of time before Vickers got her way.

Androids were a different story. She was aware that DAVID had a different agenda; whether it was Weyland's or his own, she wasn't sure. But, that was where her knowledge would end. There was no way to trick DAVID into revealing more, short of breaking into his systems and extracting it from him. It was a move Vickers was tempted to pull. After all, she had all kinds of contacts. But, doing so carried risks that she wasn't willing to face.

She had to keep working like it was a normal day in the office, and hope that DAVID kept out of her way.

He laid his hand over a signal plate, causing the terminal to light up with a three-dimensional display of the core chamber of the pyramid. It was constructed from a recording that appeared to be taken from DAVID's very own eyes, filling with

calibrated readouts that projected onto the stone in bright overlays. Surrounding the pyramidal structures were complicated patterns of energy—the result of incomprehensible alien technology.

“The core of the pyramid. You see,” DAVID explained.

Vickers could feel herself going rigid, avarice pouring from her eyes. She didn’t avert her eyes from the display, simply muttering.

“We’re going to protocol two.”

DAVID nodded.

“I understand.”

The celebration was short lived, and Watts was grateful as she examined her reflection in the glass that separated her from the rest of the ship. Her mask, hair-net, eyewear, smock and gloves were all fastened properly. She was an immaculate image of lab safety, and she was eager to get back to work.

Holloway stood next to her, opening a dumbwaiter. With the buzz of mechanical systems, an elephantine Engineer head rose into view. A readout close by displayed the word ‘STERILE’ in bright red letters.

He gave her a nod, and they picked up the head from its receptacle. It was like carrying a smooth

boulder, and Watts was eternally grateful that she didn't have to do it alone. They set it down onto a steel table.

Then, they passed scanners over its surface. The lab's display burst to life with the accumulation of images that pulsed and rotated—X-rays and ultrasounds.

Holloway was drawn to one of the X-rays, leaning in to take in its ethereal qualities. It was as though a second face had formed and was staring back at him.

“Martin. Look...”

Watts traced the head with an ultrasound probe, monitoring for any signs of displacement. The vibrations caused a seam to open up around the edge of the face. She slotted a gloved fingertip into the seam with surgical precision, working in tandem with the probe. With enough maneuvering, she managed to separate the mask, putting it aside as her eyes settled on the face before her.

It was giant, but it was still human.

Marble-white skin, earless, hairless, withered but with the beauty of a Greek statue, eyes closed with suffering plastered on its face.

Still, strikingly human.

Watts felt her grip weaken, the probe sliding from her palm and onto the floor.

“They look like us.”

Holloway shook his head.

“We look like them. Genesis 1:27. And God created man in his own image. In his own image created He him.”

Was this what they were staring at? Was the Engineer more than a helping hand from beyond the stars?

Were they looking at God?

The thought repulsed Watts, but not as much as the acrid stench that was filling her nostrils. She clamped them, trying to ascertain the source. Then she noticed that the Engineer’s head was disintegrating before them—flesh oozing, skin peeling, all from accelerated decay.

“It’s breaking down,” Holloway observed.

“Formaldehyde!”

The two scrambled, ransacking cabinets and storage rooms. Watts found a clear plastic drum and dumped the contents, intuiting they weren’t important despite doubt telling her they might have been. Holloway dragged five-gallon jugs of preservative out of a cabinet. It was a truly unprofessional display,

and Watts was grateful that nobody else was there to see it.

Then, she turned to see DAVID and Vickers peering through the glass. Vickers wore the look of shock one typically did when stumbling upon a grievous car crash. DAVID appeared fascinated—almost amused.

Watts ignored him. Her sole focus was helping Holloway lift the rotting head into the plastic drum. She fought the urge to retch as her fingers skidded in putrefaction.

As soon as the head was inside, she helped Holloway pour the formaldehyde from the jugs, watching as it increasingly submerged.

Then, they rushed to strip off their reeking gloves and smocks, scrubbing their hands. The Engineer's head sat in its murky vat, shedding thick, tofu-like chunks of white flesh.

Watts and Holloway watched in horror, trying to catch their breath at the sight of their dead, defiled God.

“Your cadaver’s interesting.”

The voice belonged to Vickers, who had assumed control of the intercom from outside.

“But I’m more interested in the machinery in the pyramid. The core chamber. What do you think it does?”

Watts stared at Vickers incredulously.

“How could anyone know-”

Holloway sheepishly raised his hand like a child in a classroom that knew the answer, but was hesitant to give it.

“I know what it does.”

Then, Holloway turned to her.

“Think. What we’ve seen. What we know.”

He was issuing her a challenge.

She wasn’t the type to back down from a challenge.

So, she broke the problem down. There were twenty-four pyramids scattered across the moon’s equator—massive power supplies, vents in the walls, atmosphere changes, breeder tanks...

“The pyramids are terraforming machines.”

She turned to Holloway, who grinned exuberantly with confirmation.

“That’s why Earth’s ancient cultures built pyramids: in imitation of the gods.” He added.

Watts turned to Vickers, watching her hands ball into fists. If those pyramids were terraforming the moon, they would prove a formidable obstacle for a

company looking to mine its ecosystem and drain it of resources.

Holloway continued. “Twelve thousands years ago, beings from the sky set pyramids on the Earth and transformed the world. That’s what they were doing here, before their civilization failed.”

Those words struck Watts, and she returned her gaze to the severed Engineer head, picturing the wounds that adorned its body, as well as those of its brethren.

“It didn’t fail,” She asserted. “It was wiped out.”

Fifield and Milburn had found their way inside a chamber, slouching against a smooth stone wall. The room size was difficult to grasp since their headlamps could only offer so much light.

Milburn tried sleeping, but different thoughts would take turns drumming at his skull. At first, they were petty—thoughts of the crew laughing at him, Janek scolding him, Holloway gloating...

Then, he’d remember what Fifield said earlier, and then he’d wonder if something was watching him from the dark, waiting to strike once his eyes were closed.

So, he kept sweeping the room with his headlight, hoping that he’d fall asleep without

realizing it, waking up to his rescue. Maybe, if he were lucky, he'd wake up in a cryopod, the whole shitty day being nothing but a bad dream.

An insect clicked into view—a centipede that stretched three feet long and was thick as a man's thumb. It had a gray, hard segmented shell, and a hammer-head like a shark. Milburn was captivated, picking it up and lifting it to the light.

“Look at this!”

He turned to Fifield, who leaped back, wild-eyed.

“Jesus! Put it down!”

Milburn laughed as he let the centipede wind its segmented body around his arm.

“Relax. Your suit's bug-proof. Hell, it's bulletproof.”

Fifield continued to recoil. Milburn, having had his fun, turned back to the centipede. He wasn't an entomologist, but he couldn't help but find it fascinating as its glittering body spiraled around him in fluid waves.

As its head quested between his fingers, he noticed a white vertical slit on its otherwise featureless face. It changed quickly to a horizontal position, widening to reveal rows of needle-like teeth.

Milburn's laughing faded. This wasn't amusing anymore.

"That's enough," He tried to casually breathe out as he reached for the centipede with his free hand. He couldn't let Fifield know he was worried. Before his fingertips could touch the centipede, it locked its segments together, digging in with its body.

Milburn tensed. He could feel blood circulation cutting off in his arm, the flesh grinding against muscle and bone, like everything was about to snap at any second.

"Get it off!" He panicked. "It's crushing me!"

Fifield jumped to his feet, pulling out a sharp utility knife. He lunged at Milburn, digging the blade behind the centipede's head. Fluorescent green blood spilled from the creature onto Milburn's hand. He was anticipating the moment the centipede eased up and freed his arm.

That moment never came. Instead, Milburn felt an even worse pain needle through the back of his hand. He dared to look down, where the centipede's blood churned and bubbled as it ate through his skin. Smoke wafted upward, the smell of charred flesh and burning material slithering into Milburn's nostrils.

"Ahh! Help me! Christ!"

A thought crossed Milburn's mind in between the flashes of white-hot agony.

There was a breach in his suit.

He was exposed.

Holloway studied the data displays of cross-sections of the dead Engineer's skull. Watts wasn't content with data, her attention on the head itself. Her nose was an inch from the plastic tank, and the sight of the Engineer's degraded head made her nauseous.

Still, she watched. She couldn't afford to miss any critical details. If she could get through this, she'd hopefully never have to do it again.

A current in the formaldehyde peeled away one of the Engineer's gossamer eyelids, revealing a singular eyeball as black as obsidian, yet iridescent like opal—beauty in decay.

Watts procured a small plastic case, opening it to reveal a high-tech control unit with a screen. She then popped open the plastic capsule, carefully pulling out a tiny seed probe, smaller than a grain of rice.

She dropped it into the vat, guiding it with the control unit as it navigated the thick liquid and approached the severed neck. It burrowed into the medulla oblongata, disappearing from view.

Watts turned to the screen, where the probe climbed along cavernous neural channels, progressing through the skull.

Footsteps grew closer. She suspected it would be Vickers or DAVID. To her surprise, she spotted Glasse in the screen's reflection, observing the probe's journey with curiosity.

"You won't get anything. Tissue's too degraded." Holloway said. His brow furrowed, and he added "Brain chamber's massive, even proportionately."

"Neural paths are still conductive," She countered, watching the seed probe reach the optic nerve of the exposed eye. Then the screen filled with a blurry face, features a challenge to distinguish. Holloway and Glasse leaned closer, trying to get a better look.

Then, the trio shared a realization.

The face was Watts. They were seeing through the point of view of the dead Engineer's still functioning eye.

Miracles and wonders.

The image dissolved into noise, error messages flickering across the display.

"Formaldehyde's killing the tissue," Watts sighed.

"Did you record that?" Holloway asked.

“Of course.”

Watts ignored Glasse’s avid looks of awe as she ran a fingertip over the Engineer’s severed eyeball, having placed it in a shallow tub of preservative. She needed to concentrate.

She wore magnifying goggles on her forehead, the lenses lowering and raising as needed. She ran a razor over the apple-sized orb, carefully extracting the hard lens from behind the cornea. Once it separated, she held the lens up to her eye.

“The lens is where the phase shift happens.”

She noted the lens’ luminescence as well as its blurry, uncorrected view.

“Glasse. I want to look through these lenses. Can you seal them and do the optical correction?”

Glasse smiled as he reached out, plucking the magnifying goggles from Watts’ forehead.

“Got an idea about that,” He replied.

Fifield tried to ignore Milburn’s violent writhing and his excruciating screams, heels drumming frantically across the ground. He was kneeling over his friend, helplessly pulling at the tail of the centipede. It had all but vanished into Milburn’s suit.

Fifield could feel the centipede slipping through his grip, its needle-like legs poking at the reinforced fabric of his spacesuit. He shuddered to think about how that would feel on exposed skin.

Milburn clawed at Fifield with his free arm, eyes wide, mouth foaming.

“Cut off my arm. Cut off my-”

His eyes rolled back into his head, the spittle oozing from his lips turning a deep crimson hue. Fifield looked down to realize that the centipede had long since slithered from his grasp.

His best friend was choking and dying right in front of him.

Delirium throttled Fifield as he saw the centipede’s head emerge between Milburn’s teeth. It seemed to greet Fifield with a snarl, letting him know that he’d failed, and Milburn was now worm food.

Fifield scrambled to his feet, running into the dark.

He was unsure how long he’d been running, where he was going, and whether anything was following him.

He couldn’t erase thoughts of Milburn from his mind. He blamed himself for separating them from the group and stranding them in the cave. If only he

didn't give into fear, if only he paid more attention—
if only, if only...

Fifield stumbled on, exhausted. Sweat had pooled up inside his suit, fogging his already obscured vision. Pain shot through his shoulder as he hit a structure. He didn't know what it was, only that he'd knocked it over. Something shattered near his feet.

The sound threaded through his ears into his brain—a deep buzzing. More insects.

“Fifield to Magellan,” He desperately wailed into his comms. “Come on, come on. Anybody, seriously! God damn it!”

No response. All that running and he was still in a damn communication black spot. The insects surrounded him, landing on his shoulders, crawling across his visor.

“Get off!”

Fifield swatted at his helmet, crushing a handful of them under his gloved palm. He cursed as their innards obscured his view even further.

He was about to try and wipe it off when he felt an intense stinging that riddled his palms and quivered his fingers. His visor melted away, the acid eating the plexiglass in seconds. Just like the centipede—he should've known!

“Shit.”

The swarm barreled inside. Tiny legs pecked at his exposed skin and eyes as he clawed at his helmet, desperate to pull it off.

Insect fangs dug into his cheek. His pupils dilated as breath hissed into his nostrils, and his body stiffened as if experiencing a powerful electrical jolt.

He crumpled to the ground, screaming and convulsing. He yearned for death—the quick release from whatever was going on inside his body.

The more time passed, the more convinced he was that death wasn't coming.

He was in for something worse.

E L E V E N

The storm battered the Magellan, testing the ship's suspension by jolting it back and forth. Weyland Industries' engineering held strong, as the vessel remained rooted to the ground.

Watts' bed had become her sanctuary. In Holloway's arms, her head resting on his broad chest, she felt like she could reflect without crew mates yelling in her ear or the environment tossing her into the sky. It was the only time on this mission where everything was calm.

“We found the gods. And they’ve been murdered.”

She hadn’t meant to say it out loud. It was a thought that percolated before forcing its way through her open mouth on a river of impulse. She didn’t move her head to see Holloway’s reaction, staring into space as his voice trickled down toward her.

“You’ve pried too many arrowheads out of old skulls to get squeamish now. They’ve been dead what, eighteen hundred years? Two thousand?”

“What could kill them?” Her question was a test. Holloway’s dismissive nature was getting on her nerves. She was curious to see if it would withstand the scrutiny he seemed to want to avoid.

After a brief moment of contemplation, Holloway laughed bitterly.

“Who knows? But I guess we know why they never came back to us. Something killed them off—back around the time of Christ. Maybe he was one of them! A great teacher, sent from Heaven? Jesus. The last Engineer.”

“Martin, stop!” Watts replied with a light slap to his chest. He continued to laugh with amusement, but his answer hung in the air, creating a bad taste in Watts’ mouth. She figured out why Holloway was avoiding the question.

He was scared of the answer.

“You’ll come a-waltzing, Matilda, with me...”

Janek stood at the Bridge window, staring out into the storm as he played his squeeze box. The Magellan shielded him from the brunt of the buffeting clouds and howling winds, the lighthouse beams of its beacons sweeping through into the nether.

DAVID observed Janek with fascination. The folk song was upbeat, despite its subject matter of a swagman drowning himself to avoid police capture and haunting a billabong in the Australian outback. Of all the crew, Janek seemed most likely to find solace in the morbid. DAVID presumed it was because the Captain had lived a long and storied life. He wondered how that would feel. For him, achievements were a foreign concept. He had objectives—tangible goals that didn’t bring him satisfaction. They were completed solely because they needed to be.

His current objective was below the bridge. He approached the ladder, keeping out of sight as he descended into the navigation computer room. Monitor light bathed his face as his fingers flew over the keyboard, typing with silent and swift dexterity.

“Activate. Manual override,” He ordered his fellow machine.

With dawn came the passing of the storm. Sunlight filtered through the clouds, greeting the Magellan as it stood on its still intact landing struts.

Vickers stood inside her secret room, its ambient hum having reached a lower frequency. Indicator lights flashed green, prompting her to throw switches. Protocol Two was in full effect.

Four hibernation pods slid from the metal walls, their lids opening to reveal four different variations of soldier—all tough customers with bulging muscles, crew cuts, and scars. Their pods were labeled with their names; Shepherd, Vigoda, Ray, and Card.

Vickers kept her eyes on the leader of this band of mercenaries as he came to, sitting up and clasping his head with a wince.

“Captain Shepherd,” Vickers announced.

“Reporting.”

“Lydia Vickers. I’m your authority.”

Shepherd nodded, eyes still squinting.

“Understood.”

“I’ll brief you on the way. We need to move.”

“No breakfast?” He grinned.

Watts' eyelids flickered as she was roused awake. She turned to Holloway to find that he also had his sleep cut short by the sound of vulcanized rubber slamming against the steel floor outside.

"What is that?" She murmured, still groggy.

Watts and Holloway would find the answer in the E.V.A. room, where they met a slim, dark man with an air of calm.

Holloway approached this new figure, trying to hide how perplexed he was.

"Where is everybody? We can't—who are you?"

"Captain Janek took his crew out to retrieve his missing men. They never came in."

Watts shuddered. Fifield and Milburn were still out there.

"And you are..." Holloway continued.

"Vigoda. Weyland Security Detail."

And, there it was. Weyland's agenda was rearing its ugly head into their expedition.

"Where'd you come from?" Watts asked.

"Director's call to brief you on that. I'm supposed to escort you to the worksite."

"Worksite?" Holloway replied, prompting Vigoda to indicate to his mapping unit.

"Haven't been out yet. I understand it's in some kind of pyramid."

Watts and Holloway bristled with fury as they marched to Vickers' suite, Vigoda sheepishly in tow. He had warned them that his superior, a Captain Shepherd, was guarding Vickers' room, should they try anything untoward. They were still shocked when they saw the stocky soldier standing by the door.

This is madness, Watts thought. This was a scientific expedition, not a military campaign. Was this Weyland's plan? To go to war with the gods?

Vickers sat calmly at her desk, barely regarding the scientists.

"Why wasn't I told about these additional personnel?" Holloway demanded to know.

"They're my personnel," Vickers lashed. "On my ship."

"What are the guns for?" Watts asked pointedly.

"I'm being careful. These new finds give our work a new importance."

Watts folded her arms. "You should have talked to us. Martin's mission leader. That's in our contract."

Vickers narrowed her gaze like a sniper lining up a kill shot.

"The second you found alien technology, control of this mission reverted to me. That's in your contract too."

Shit.

Holloway and Watts exchanged grim looks. As much as they hated to admit it, Vickers had outplayed them. They made a deal with the devil, who had now come to collect.

“Mr. Weyland’s pouring trillions into Mars,” Vickers continued. “He’s spent a fortune building ships like the Magellan to search for colony planets. But Earthlike worlds are vanishingly rare. The right distance from the sun, the right atmosphere, enough water...”

She glanced across the suite at her holographic display, where a live feed played from the pyramid worksite: DAVID interfacing with the Engineers’ extraterrestrial equipment—the terraformers they’d identified earlier.

“This is a technology to transform worlds. He’ll never give it up.”

Vickers turned back to Watts and Holloway, combative.

“And neither will I.”

“The science must come first,” Growled Holloway. “You can wait until we’ve documented—”

“You’re standing on an alien world courtesy of Weyland Industries. Be grateful.”

Holloway bit his lip, suppressing the urge to yell something he'd regret. Watts was transfixed by the holographic terminal, staring at the images in horror.

Weyland was disrespecting the gods, desecrating their homes, and stealing their power so he could plunder the galaxy like the parasite he was.

And they'd unwittingly helped him do it.

Watts didn't want to believe it.

"What are they doing in there?" She cried.

As Watts rattled in her space suit, she noted that the core chamber of the pyramid no longer stood with majesty in its expanse. It now felt smaller—pathetic even.

They were too late.

She and Holloway had to shield their eyes as powerful floodlights illuminated the once-mysterious world around them. A fine spray of water emanated from the darkness overhead.

Watts felt weak as she watched her crew at work. DAVID, Chance, and Ravel dismantled the hulking mechanism before her, peeling its thick skin away with an arsenal of power saws and compact explosives. Robotic scanners immortalized this callous destruction in high resolution.

Overseeing all of this were two Weyland Security soldiers, standing guard with powerful rifles against their chests. Their combat vacuum suits read Card and Ray. Watts wanted nothing more than to beg them to stop—to see the madness they were complicit in.

She could sense that Holloway was having different ideas, all but gnashing his teeth as he seethed behind the radial glass of his helmet.

The map unit filled with activity as Janek maneuvered the cargo rover through the pyramid's many winding catacombs. He wasn't as smooth with this unwieldy land-vehicle as he was with the Magellan, but they were still making good time.

He was also the only crew member with a level head. He could feel the discomfort from the men behind him lapping at the back of his neck. Stillwell, Glasse, Downs, and Brick swept their flashlight beams over the rock-covered walls—all sharing the same thought; why hadn't they heard from Milburn or Fifield?

"Milburn. Fifield. You read me?" Glasse asked into his comms. "Comm back."

"We should be getting beacons off their suits," Janek replied.

“Shielding in the walls?” Stillwell threw out to the others, hoping it made more sense to them than it did in his head.

“Suits could have failed,” Brick added.

Janek shook his head.

“Both suits?”

A large section of the core chamber’s central mechanism fell to the floor, sending waves of clamorous reverberation across the cavern. Watts felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning, she saw Holloway motion for her to follow.

As they slinked away, she knew they wouldn’t be noticed. Nothing short of trying to snatch one of the mercenaries’ weapons would draw the attention of these worker drones. She’d hoped that their paycheck would be enough to buy them a damn spine.

Holloway brought Watts to the lower passage, where they stepped around the dead Engineers. Their statuesque likeness brought tears to Watts’ eyes.

“We found the tomb of the gods, and brought grave-robbers right to the door.”

“Let them scratch,” Holloway spat. “This find’s too big to ruin. There’s two dozen pyramids on this moon.”

Holloway turned his flashlight to the dark, glossy biomechanical apparatuses that lined the walls.

“Anyway, they’re on the wrong track. That’s infrastructure. The core activity of the complex was down here.”

They turned the corner, only to be met with more skeletal Engineers, ravaged by time and decay. Watts peered closer at the necropolis, noting the bodies of the fallen gods. They lacked the sheer mutilation of their peers. In fact, they each only bore a single wound.

Their ribs extended out of their chest, reaching for the heavens and signaling the displaced remains within. Something had exploded its way out. Otherwise, they were unmarked.

“Something different killed them.”

Watts turned to Holloway, who was preoccupied with the surrounding mechanisms—high-tech iron maidens that appeared to fit the bodies of the dead giants. Some suggested sitting positions, others standing. All of them had an invasive design—not to embrace, but to penetrate and fuse.

They continued to a wide colonnade in which the shadows returned, huddling around them. Holloway stepped in front, following the mechanisms

as they stretched further out, letting the darkness swallow him whole.

Watts flinched as extravagant light filled her vision. It was another hologram—a digital ghost dragging itself across the floor, its monstrous visage eye-to-eye with the trembling scientist.

She turned, hoping that the enhanced visibility would let her spot Holloway. She wished she hadn't been so preoccupied with the dead Engineers, the way he had been with the mechanisms. They needed to work together.

But, Holloway was nowhere to be found. In an instant, he was as ethereal as the facsimile hovering behind her. She called out his name, getting no response.

Then, the hologram disappeared in a puff of static, leaving her alone.

Janek felt his calm, authoritative air crumble. He and Stillwell couldn't believe what their eyes were presenting.

Milburn was splayed out on the deck, his limbs contorted in inhuman directions. The hole in his helmet gave them a clear view of his head, which had been gnawed down to the bone, his jaw hanging open.

“What happened to him?” Stillwell trembled.

Before Janek could make a half-assed attempt at an answer, Stillwell bent down, placing his gloved hands on either side of Milburn’s helmet. With a deep breath, he wrenched it free, holding it in front of him like a basketball.

Janek’s light beam caught a centipede, the length and width of his arm, as it plopped from the vacant helmet, landing on the deck. As Stillwell jumped back with a cry, Janek pulled his pistol, plugging the insect with three high-calibre rounds. Its blood spurted out, creating tiny plumes of smoke as it ate away at the ground.

Janek examined his pistol, where a pinprick of this acid was chewing through the barrel.

Before he could speculate any further, Downs’ voice startled him.

“Captain.”

Janek turned to find Downs holding a piece of shattered helmet with stenciled lettering.

‘Fifield.’

Janek’s jaw clenched grimly. All he could offer in response was a resigned “Where’s the rest of him?”

“No sign,” Downs replied.

“All right. We’re done here. All hands back aboard.”

“What about Milburn?” Stillwell jumped in. Everybody turned to the ravaged corpse.

Janek sighed. “We can’t bring the body aboard. God knows what’s in there. Bag him. We’ll put him in an ore hopper.”

It was undignified. But, in his current state, it was the best that Milburn was going to get. It looked like it was a touch more desirable than whatever Fifield was going through.

Vickers sat in her suite, staring at the holographic terminal. It greeted her with the point of view of Milburn’s helmet cam, which was now sealed in clear plastic in the bed of the cargo rover.

Janek’s filtered voice sputtered through.

“Repeat, I have two men down. I’m pulling my crew back to the ship. I’d advise you to do the-”

Vickers flinched as Watts’ voice cut in.

“Please, anyone... I need help. Martin’s missing.”

Vickers clenched her jaw. Only a mission such as this could make her nervous. It was a feeling she thought she’d left behind once she started working for Weyland.

This was supposed to be simple. All the crew needed to do was secure the alien technology. Instead,

they were separating from the group and getting themselves killed. Not to mention bringing potential contaminants back to the ship.

Vickers' eyes flicked from one video feed to the next as Janek's voice came back in.

"Watts. Where are you?"

She spotted a reflection. Captain Shepherd stood behind her. Had he noticed her nerves? Was he judging her capacity to lead? She turned to him, controlling the quaver in her voice.

"Captain Shepherd. Consider yourself responsible for my personal security."

Watts had regrouped with Janek in a nondescript juncture of the catacombs where she leaned against the rover, struggling to catch her long-lost breath.

"I've just lost a third of my crew," Janek grumbled. "I'm not sending any more men off into the dark."

"We can't leave Martin out there," She gasped in response.

"Get Vickers to lend you some soldiers."

"She says her forces are occupied."

The typical, rational Watts would have understood Janek's reserved sigh. He was in a difficult position, responsible for the fate of a group

of unprepared men on a hostile alien planet. Her regular self buried deep within, reassuring her that the contempt that bubbled like a boiler about to blow was not for Janek.

It wasn't even for Vickers. Like them, she was here to perform a job. Years of corporate subservience had robbed her of her capacity to know any better.

Instead, Watts flushed with hatred for Weyland. She imagined him sitting behind his desk, receiving the news that he'd callously sent a third of the Magellan's crew to their death. She pictured the devilish grin on his withered face as he learned that he'd only have to pay some of the crew, only feeling disappointed that he had to pay any of them at all.

She understood why Janek didn't want to risk sending Stillwell, Downs, or Kamarov into the caverns to become the next Milburn...

Or the next Martin.

No. She couldn't think like that. Martin had to be alive. He had just gotten lost.

Just like Milburn and Fifield.

No!

"I'll stay."

The voice was DAVID's as he stepped out of the dark, calm as ever. A slim machine gun was slung over his shoulder.

“You’ll be safe.”

Watts swallowed hard. “Thank you.”

Janek’s body went into autopilot as the rigidity of protocol took over. He was outside the Magellan, giving out orders to the rest of the crew as they unloaded Milburn’s body from the rover.

“Put him in the number one ore hopper. Get the scrubbers on in the airlock. Sterilize everything.”

He gave Stillwell a nod, prompting him to remotely lower a thick, steel bin on heavy chains from the belly of the ship. It was a bit unorthodox, but it would serve the purpose of storing Milburn’s body for the time being.

With a grunt, Janek loaded the body in. From there, he and Stillwell joined the rest of the crew as they entered the airlock, one at a time, where they were blasted by sterilizing agents and radiation.

As he got closer to the airlock, Janek’s mind flooded with images of Milburn’s corpse, staring out with vacant sockets as his skull cried out in silent agony.

He hoped that the ship would be enough to decontaminate them.

For the first time in too long, he was well and truly afraid.

T W E L V E

Watts' throat burned from the constant yelling. Martin's name branded her trachea as she hurled it into the void that stretched past her flashlight, listening to it bounce from cave wall to cave wall. In a way, she felt grateful that the pain stopped her from yelling further. She didn't want to attract whatever got to Milburn and Fifield.

And whatever might have gotten to Martin.

"You and Holloway should work with me," DAVID announced. He was seemingly more

preoccupied with the walls of the catacomb, rapt admiration on his face.

“I’m learning amazing things. This mechanism—the first layer uses energy fields to catalyze chemical reactions. The second can suspend the strong and weak forces—transmuting one element into another. The third layer builds customized bacteria. Seeds the air with them. It creates life as a tool, to change worlds-”

“I can’t think about this now!” Watts snapped. Not that she would ever admit it, but DAVID’s behavior reminded her of Martin—the way he was so preoccupied with the science, even under circumstances that didn’t call for it. Had the roles been reversed, she knew that Martin would waste no time in looking for her. But, would he have entertained DAVID’s conversation as well?

“You should,” DAVID replied with a hint of curtness. Whatever he had that approximated patience was evidently waning fast. Before Watts could respond, his artificial lungs let out a sigh.

“I understand,” He purred. “You’re emotional.”

“I’m human.”

“That’s what I mean.”

Before Watts could retort, she was cut off by Janek’s filtered voice.

“Watts. We’ve got another storm front coming in. Looks like it follows the sunset line. If you’re coming in you’d better do it now.”

“No,” Watts growled. Had she not made herself clear? She would not step on the Magellan again without Martin by her side, even if it was his corpse.

Not that it would be, of course. But, she had to entertain the possibility that Martin could be-

“I see light.”

It was DAVID, eyes wide as he stared forward at a chasm. Watts squinted, willing her eyes to adjust. Was DAVID messing with her?

“Janek, hang on...”

The light was dim, but it was certainly there, as it bobbed at the other end of the passageway. Watts could see DAVID reach for her as she broke off into a sprint. He wanted her to practice caution—to not hastily charge through such a potentially perilous space. She didn’t care. If Martin was there, she needed to reach him.

Seeing him brought a flood of emotions, including a particularly intense battle between relief and horror. He staggered blearily toward her, the wall barely keeping him upright. His helmet and gear were stripped from his body, save for his chest lamp, which flickered and ebbed.

Watts caught him as he stumbled from the wall, resting his head against her bulbous helmet.

“We’ve got him!” Watts triumphantly shouted into her comms. “Martin! Where’s your helmet?”

“Broken. I fell.”

The words came out in puffs of breath, like Holloway’s body was using the last of its reserves to offer the barest form of communication humanly possible.

“Little... disoriented. I’ve just been...”

His exposed arm raised, vaguely gesturing to the tunnels behind him. DAVID lowered his removed helmet onto Holloway’s head, locking it into place.

“Here. I can do without this.”

Once the filtered air filled Holloway’s lungs, his beady eyes met with Watts, full of gratitude.

She swelled, grateful that he was safe, and that she didn’t have to steel herself for the emotional toll of finding him hollowed out like Milburn.

“Let’s get you home,” She whispered.

Watts gripped Holloway close as DAVID led them onto the airlock, giving her a reassuring hand.

Then, he turned his head over his shoulder, peering at the canal that led back to the central crater.

Watts took that as her cue to check on Holloway once again.

She felt the lift stir beneath her feet. Any second now, they would begin their ascent to the Magellan.

DAVID turned back to her as he stepped backward from the lift. Astonished, Watts peered over as she and Holloway were lifted upward.

Their android companion, content that they were safe, was now sprinting through the storm, charging through the powerful winds, and heading straight for the pyramid.

Thoughts of DAVID plagued Watts as she helped Holloway out of what little space suit he had left. He looked as though his time in the caverns had aged him a decade, pronouncing the lines on his face and forming dark craters under his eyes.

“I didn’t think I’d see you again,” Janek announced as he approached them. “You know we lost two men.”

The weary Holloway offered a courteous nod.

“She told me,” He barely formed with his sagging, cracked lips. “I’m sorry.”

His legs buckled, prompting Watts to bend to keep holding him upright.

“I need to lie down. We’ll size things in the morning. Fair enough?”

“Of course.”

Janek’s eyes narrowed. He wanted Holloway to know that, as soon as he was adequately rested, he would have to answer for why two of their crew faced such horrific deaths. It was his mission. He and Watts were responsible.

The thought unnerved Watts. Were they prepared for that conversation?

She fixated on that question as she and Holloway walked aft toward their cabin. Whatever weakness Holloway claimed to feel had seemingly evaporated. He was perfectly upright and balanced.

“What happened to you?” She asked.

“Not here,” He responded, keeping his eyes forward and his head upright. There it was—that pit in her stomach returning.

Later, as Holloway stood shirtless in front of the mirror in their cabin washroom, nonchalantly brushing his teeth, Watts stood beside him, transfixed by a red weal that snaked around his neck, sliding over his collarbones.

He lowered his head, spitting a foamy mixture of saliva and toothpaste into the sink, and rinsing his mouth.

“Jocelyn. I saw something. God, my mouth tastes like an old boot.”

“What’s this?”

He stiffened, clearly unsure of the answer.

“Neck-ring of my suit, I think. Fell on it.”

The answer was mumbled, bereft of conviction. Watts stirred as Holloway brought a pair of nervous fingers to the abraded skin. His eyes drifted.

“What did you see?” Watts asked.

“After my fall, I woke up walking. Delirious. My helmet wasn’t right. I took it off. I was in and out.”

The words came out in a monotone, like they were pushed off a conveyor belt by someone trying to expedite the most digestible parts of a wild and vivid story.

“I just wandered. I went up into a huge space like a cathedral. And I found a model of the galaxy. Floating in the air.”

“Are you okay?” Watts asked, failing to mask her growing concern. “You sound-”

“This was real. My headset video is wherever my helmet is... but my suit tracker will show you where I was.”

Watts opened her mouth to assure Holloway that she believed him, only for him to turn around and

lean close. Whatever he was about to say, he didn't want anybody else hearing.

"Listen. This star map had a marker representing Earth. Very clear. Another marker I'm sure represents this moon. But there were others. At least seven or eight more."

Watts lit up. Their crime against the gods wasn't as severe as she thought. Perhaps the Engineers would live up to their divine status and forgive them for their human err.

"The Engineers aren't from here," Holloway continued. "This moon's just an outpost. Abandoned. But if we follow that map, we may yet make contact with a living civilization."

"Martin."

"The location of the Engineer worlds is the real prize. Next to that, Weyland's terraforming is chump change. We need to get coordinates. And keep them from the Company. We have to play this smart."

Watts drank in every word.

"All right."

Holloway allowed himself a brief smile before his serious demeanor returned.

"Two men dead... Vickers is jumpy. As soon as she gets what she wants, she'll take this ship home. We have to move fast."

Then he stopped himself, a violent tremble settling over him as a sheen of sweat blanketed his body.

“We will,” Watts replied. “Are you alright?”

For a second, Holloway didn’t respond. His eyes were transfixed in a widened display of fear. He swallowed hard, brazening through it as mirth returned to his face.

He pulled Watts close. For the first time since they left Weyland’s Wheel, she saw that carnal desire in his eyes.

“I’m fine, now.”

He ended his words with a long, passionate kiss. It wasn’t long before he was tumbling her onto their cabin beds. Part of her wanted to protest—to point out that they were likely being watched. But, it was quickly silenced by the part of her that didn’t care. They had spent long enough repressing themselves. Now, they were about to burst.

They struggled out of their clothes, clinging tightly to each other. As they made love, Watts tried to convince herself that everything was okay. Yet, Holloway seemed ill at ease. He was tense. His breathing felt rapid.

She rolled them over, sitting atop him. He ran his hands up her body, settling them on her breasts as he

exhaled deeply. She followed suit, planting her palms on his pectorals, only to recoil.

“Your heart’s beating so hard.”

“That’s your fault,” He replied, vulnerability puncturing his voice. There was no hiding the fear under the surface.

Holloway seemed to realize this, as he rolled himself atop Watts, driving her into the mattress with zealous thrusts. Watts had anticipated this moment for so long, but any ecstasy she was hoping to feel was ruined by the unconvincing bravado that Holloway was trying to put on. Something was wrong, and she was perturbed by his need to hide it from her.

Suddenly, he tensed, his muscles rigid as he finished. Watts drew breath through her teeth with a hiss, fingers raking his back. Relief settled over her. Now, they’d be able to talk.

Then, Holloway screamed.

His eyes bulged, tendons standing out of his throat. Watts was trapped, forced to stare eye-to-eye with his agonized face.

“Martin!” She called out. “Martin!”

His body responded with violent convulsions, his eyes a pearl white as foam filled his open mouth. Watts rolled him over, trying to hold him still as his

limbs flailed—trying even harder to ignore the horrifying sound of his grinding teeth.

“Martin!”

CRACK! Watts turned to the middle of Holloway’s chest, right beneath the sternum. The skin was intact, but the inside appeared distorted like the bones had shifted. A lump formed, rapidly growing as a guttural whine gurgled from Holloway’s throat.

Tears formed in the skin, heralding beads of dark red blood, until a grotesque head pushed its way out—a strange, conical entity formed from white cartilage, flailing its hideous lunging jaw.

Whatever this parasite was, it wasn’t done with Holloway’s body. Amidst a fountain of Holloway’s blood, it fought its way from the savage womb in his chest cavity, tentacles whipping erratically. All Holloway could do was lash out at nothing, fruitlessly waving his limbs as the life ebbed from him.

All Watts could do was scream.

As soon as the creature freed itself, it turned to Watts with a hiss. She slapped at it blindly, tumbling from the bed, wrapped in the bloody bed sheet. She squirmed across the floor, the parasite at her feet. As it opened its mouth, tentacles poised to latch around her, she leaped into a nearby clothes locker, slamming the steel door shut.

Her mind raced, her body shaking as she fought every urge to collapse. At least the parasite was outside, where it couldn't reach her.

God, poor Martin.

Then, she spotted a white puddle forming at her feet. The parasite had flattened itself and was now trying to press through the opening left by the closed door. Watts shrieked in horror.

She heard the door slam open outside, followed by footsteps. The creature zipped away, leaving her alone. She shoved herself through the locker doors, naked and bloodied.

Janek and Stillwell stood in shock, unable to decide whether to give their attention to the crazed Watts, or Holloway and the giant hole in his chest. Watts rushed to her dead partner, sobbing and blubbering as she hovered over his body.

"Martin. Martin!"

She didn't notice Holloway's jacket being wrapped around her until Stillwell gently pulled her away from the bed. Her brain was a swirl of incomprehensible noise.

The shock had set in.

Soon, she was in the break room, sitting at a steel table in an oversized coverall. She could feel Holloway's dried blood as it hardened over her skin

and caught in her body hair. She couldn't address the knot of crewmen around her. She couldn't even acknowledge their existence. She simply stared into space as Janek barked orders at Stillwell, Brick, Glasse, and Downs.

“Take care of her. Get her a sedative. Downs. Get Holloway into a freezer. Everybody else with me.”

Fifield was still alive.

His breathing was horrible, ragged, and wet. His body sat in a corner of the catacombs, twitching weakly as he was propped up against the stone wall.

His brain was no longer capable of thoughts, only feelings. He couldn't comprehend why he was there, or what he was doing. But he felt the bones of his skull as they shifted inside the gelatinous mass that used to be his head, the skin reduced to a malleable putty.

He mewed in pain as his head started to elongate.

Watts opened Holloway's hypersleep freezer, where his body had been laid to rest. She'd managed to wash away the blood that caked her body, but it did little to ease her pain as she tenderly caressed his cold

cheek. The Magellan had an extensive crew. But, without Holloway, Watts was well and truly alone.

She slid her hand over his collarbone, lying it flat on his chest, right above the awful yawning wound. Even in this state, Watts wasn't prepared to leave Holloway just yet. She wasn't ready to step out of the room and face the others.

She wasn't ready to face the parasite that was now on the ship.

All she wanted to do was reminisce, bringing herself back to the excitement she and Holloway felt when they found the first sign of the Engineers, when they first started working together, when they first fell in love.

It brought a brief respite, only to dissipate when a hand clasped around her shoulder, pulling her away. Glasse's dismayed voice hit her like a gust of wind.

"You don't want to see that..."

Watts didn't want to turn on him. But, who the hell was he to say that to her? He didn't know her. They were barely work colleagues, and even that came with a slew of caveats. The only person that knew her was now hollowed out and stuffed into a fridge, and she wanted to know why. So, she snapped back at Glasse.

"I want to understand."

T H I R T E E N

As the remainder of the crew gathered in the Magellan's mess room, Janek felt the absence of Milburn, Fifield, and now Holloway. Watts was elsewhere, not that Janek blamed her. He couldn't begin to imagine what she was going through after such a grisly experience.

There was no time to express sympathies to an absentee. He needed to focus on the matter at hand. Glasse, Downs, Brick, and Stillwell sat before him, his automatic pistols holstered to their hips. Vickers stood nearby, accompanied by Captain Shepherd and

Vigoda. Janek's first instinct was not to trust military types, especially mercenaries. But the situation called for cooperation, and he was nothing if not pragmatic.

"All right! Listen up," He called out. "I expect you all know what..."

His voice drifted as Watts shuffled in, eyes trained on the floor as everybody stared at her. Janek wanted to take her aside—assure her she didn't need to be here. She could find a spot to grieve and have some privacy. But he knew that wasn't what she needed right now, as she found an isolated seat near them and slumped down.

Janek cleared his throat, drawing everybody's attention back to him.

"We've got some kind of parasite aboard ship."

"I suggest you kill it," Vickers snapped.

"That's a bright idea," Downs sarcastically barbed.

"Show us where it is, lady," Kamarov added. "We just spent five hours looking for the damn thing."

Janek was seconds from losing it. This was not productive. He needed to assert command like a damn captain.

"We found Engineers who died like Martin."

The room was plunged into silence. All eyes were back on Watts as she fidgeted with her hands, continuing to stare at the floor.

“Explosive wounds in the chest. Whatever killed Martin is the same thing that killed the Engineers a thousand years ago.”

“Jesus,” Stillwell sighed.

“But not all the Engineers died that way,” She added. “The others were torn apart. Slashed to pieces.”

Murmurs poured into the room as the crew turned to each other, trying to grapple with the implications of her words. If she was right; they weren’t just dealing with a space parasite—they were dealing with a space parasite that potentially killed their god.

Heaven help them.

It was when Janek’s eyes settled on Vickers that he knew what to do. Her expression told him everything. If she had doubts, it was time to abort the mission.

“We’re a modular ship,” Janek announced. “Self-contained life support and power in every section. I say put the ship in orbit. Vent every compartment to space. Sit in vacuum at twenty degrees Kelvin for a week. Kill anything.”

“Then what?” Downs asked.

“Straight home, man,” Stillwell replied.

That snapped Vickers back to reality. All of the concern from her face disappeared, prompting Janek to swallow grimly. He knew what was coming.

“This ship doesn’t lift until our work’s done.”

She marched to the head of the room, giving Janek a defiant look as Sheperd and Vigoda flanked her with rifles slung. The threat was quiet but unmistakable as the soldiers scanned the room, meeting the eyes of each of the crew.

Janek turned to Vickers.

“Are you serious?”

“We spent billions of dollars getting here. The technology we came for is in our hands. We just need a little more time.”

“We’re barely here three days and three men dead!”

“They were careless.”

“Careless!”

Watts welcomed the ensuing silence as she slinked out of the room. She stood in the excursion chamber, crammed into her space suit, sans helmet. Holloway’s locker caused her heart to race. She needed to move quickly, but she wanted to savor this

moment. It was the last opportunity she'd have to interact with him before all that was left were memories.

She opened the door to reveal his space suit, worn on the last day of his life. Once it was in her hands, she let her fingers linger on its folds, trying to soak up some last trace of him.

Then, she pulled a small computer chip from the chest plate of his suit and plugged it into a map unit. It was Holloway's tracker, and it mapped out his final exploration in a hologram detailed with markers, photographs, field notes, and scans.

It was everything Watts needed for what she was about to do.

She pressed one of the markers, causing Holloway's voice to filter from the map unit.

"Seven dead Engineers all facing the same way. Going where? Jocelyn's right, we don't see the big picture yet. Another level below me. I'm going down."

The silence returned. Watts wanted nothing more than to hear Holloway's voice again, even in its mangled digital facsimile. But time was of the essence. She needed to move.

Card and Vigoda braced their submachine guns against their shoulder as they led a hunting party consisting of Downs, Kamarov, and Stillwell down a service corridor. Any hope of stealth was quickly dashed, as the Magellan's crew wore noisy tool belts that loudly announced their location to any potential hostiles.

It didn't help that Card and Vigoda weren't familiar with the Magellan, squinting at the elaborate web of decks upon decks printed on their map unit.

"Vigoda," Card announced. "Take Kamarov and work the number one access way. I'll work number three with Downs and Stillwell."

"You in charge now?"

Card and Vigoda turned to see Downs folding his arms.

"Tactical op," Card replied. When civilians got snappy, the best course of action was to engage as little as possible. They'd fall into line eventually.

Kamarov, encouraged by his bold colleague, chimed in.

"Yeah, well, Stillwell's the ventilation specialist, and life support's that way. Downs is electricians and the regulators are that way."

Shit. He had a point.

Card glowered as Vigoda gave him a wry grin.

Watts wondered how long it would take for the crew to find that one of the rovers was missing, as she headed straight for the pyramid. Would they even notice?

She rolled it to a stop once she reached the work site. Ravel and Chance paused their dissection of the terraforming mechanisms nestled inside to stare at her with curiosity. One of the soldiers stood sentry, his name badge reading ‘Ray.’

Watts paid them no mind. As long as they didn’t try to stop her, she didn’t care. She took defiant steps to the ramp that led to the catacombs below.

She would finish what she and Holloway started, even if it killed her.

“You got the rifle. But you want *me* to stick my head in the hole?”

Vigoda was quickly losing his patience with Kamarov, as they stood before one of the vents.

“We grunts don’t know nothing about ships, right?” He replied sarcastically.

“What’s the damn gun for if you’re gonna stand behind me the whole time?”

Kamarov’s face dropped as Vigoda gave him a sadistic grin.

“I kill whatever kills you.”

After a second in which Kamarov was lost for words, he took a deep breath.

“Funny.”

He then clapped Vigoda on the back, heading for the exit.

“You take this vent, funny guy. I’ll be on four.”

Infinite darkness greeted Watts with open arms as she descended alone into the lower passages below the pyramid. She’d never felt smaller, as she held her map unit before her like a pilgrim gripping their Bible.

She allowed herself to have faith, as she followed Holloway’s path into the unknown. Seeing his name printed on the map unit kept her moving forward.

Kamarov cursed as he carried the stepladder into the Magellan’s maintenance bay, a utilitarian steel compartment. It was heavy, and he didn’t have Card’s muscles. He almost regretted sending the man away.

Almost.

With a groan, he placed the ladder under an air vent and stepped up. He gripped a powered wrench from his belt, cocking it like a hammer as he eased up

and peered cautiously through the vent above him. As his flashlight beam stretched out into the dark, he didn't see anything out of place.

With a snort, he removed the vent cover and felt around inside. The tip of his fingers met with smooth, cold metal. He imagined the alien parasite brushing against his exposed skin, wrapping itself around his arm, and doing god knows what.

He gasped, procuring a handful of twisted steel. It was an atmosphere sensor—at least, it was what was left of an atmosphere sensor. It appeared to be bitten in half. Kamarov couldn't believe it. He assumed the creature was a lot smaller. How did it manage to do something like this?

He snatched his comm handset off his belt, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

“I got more damage on four.”

With the handset back on his belt, he'd take one last look before regrouping with the others. A miniature glint of light caught his attention. He reached inside, trying to recall if vents typically had something that smooth and reflective.

HISS!

Kamarov whipped his flashlight up, trying to snatch his arm back. A vice snapped around it. He could feel the bones bend inwards, cracks forming on

their surface. He was pulled forward, his jaw slamming against the top of the vent, loosening his teeth and filling his mouth with blood.

He cried out in pain, his dropped flashlight clattering on the floor. His free hand tried to stretch for the pistol strapped to the other side of his waist, but it was no use. He just couldn't reach it.

He braced his head against the vent's edge, clenching his teeth and straining. Maybe he could pull himself free. It wouldn't be pretty, but it was a matter of life and death.

RIIIP!

He was dragged in further, struggling on his tiptoes. His arm and head were now inside the cramped space, jagged metal piercing his face and chest. Pain seared his forehead as a flap of abraded skin settled over one of his tear-filled eyes. It was just a little parasite, what the hell was going on?

A horrific force collapsed his shoulder, shattering his clavicle and sending shards of bone through to his neck. Kamarov realized with horror that this thing was trying to pull him through a hole in which he wouldn't fit.

He could only think 'Oh god,' before he was pulled further inside, his ribs exploding in his chest and spearing his lungs. He was still breathing, but

only in slight, painful gasps. He knew he was going to die. He just hoped it wouldn't take much longer.

The last thing Kamarov ever experienced was his mangled body being pulled one last time—hips, legs, and even boots rising into the vent.

Janek stood on the bridge, staring out at the barren moon. He wanted to be down there with his men, but he needed to be ready to evacuate as soon as they returned.

“Captain!”

Brick's voice squawked through the intercom.

“Brick. What you got?”

“It's Kamarov,” He whimpered. Janek didn't know what to expect as he rushed to the Magellan's engineering deck. The life support center greeted him with the deep rumble of ventilation fans as he approached Brick, Glasse, Downs, and Stillwell. Shepherd and Vigoda guarded them from the doorway.

This made Janek fear the worst.

In front of them, an eight-inch metal duct had been cut open. Kamarov had been stuffed inside, his mutilated remains broken almost beyond recognition with folded limbs and skin torn to shreds—a bloody plug in a pipe.

Watts continued to navigate the dark, grateful for the effectiveness of her map unit as her headlamp swept nervously.

A clatter behind her caused her to jump. She swung around to find one of the spherical mapping probes bumbling through the dark, not unlike her.

She steeled herself before turning and walking on.

“Jocelyn!”

She froze. It was Holloway’s voice, muffled and distant. Was this grief? Had Holloway found a way to contact the living in his brief stint in the afterlife?

Her body shivered as she prowled towards the sound. The voice led her to a new chamber, evidently not as vast as the one she came from. Her headlamp picked out details from the dark—a domed ceiling honeycombed with cells like a beehive with vile orifices cinched tightly shut, grotesque molluscoid organisms secreted inside them.

She stumbled, looking down to see a helmet. Wasting no time in picking it up, she read the stenciled label.

‘Holloway.’

The clear visor was destroyed, edges melted, as though they came into contact with a powerful acid.

Holloway was lucky that it didn't come into contact with him.

Lucky.

Watts looked up, eager not to think about their last night together. Her eyes settled on a tracheal air shaft that curved up into the dark. Before she could deduce its purpose, an electrical crackle and a flare of blue light made her leap against the wall.

The shaft released a bright blue humanoid shape, sending it to the floor where it crumpled. Watts recognized it immediately. It was Holloway, lying in pain, barely conscious. He glowed a luminous blue—a holographic ghost.

“Jocelyn!” He cried out in terror.

His headlamp shined upward, causing one of the creatures in their amniotic stasis to awaken, its fluid legs thrashing inside its organic prison. The sphincter mouth keeping it in place dilated, prompting the mucus inside to slither out like a quivering rope. The soft white octopoid used this thick strand to crawl toward Holloway like a spider zealously closing in on a trapped fly.

It landed on his visor, and Watts heard the hiss of acid as smoke rose from the glass.

Then, the hologram sizzled out, leaving Watts gasping for air as her eyes stood wide in terror. In the

beam of her headlamp lay the dead arachnid creature, its legs curled inward.

Watts tore out of the chamber, hoping she hadn't awakened anything else. Once she was back in the lower corridor, she raised her map unit, trying to focus as her hands shook uncontrollably, her incessant panting threatening to fog up her helmet from the inside.

Holloway's course had been direct and clear.

Now, it was a meandering thread.

A drunkard's walk.

A condemned man stumbling to his grave.

F O U R T E E N

“All hands, duty stations. Ready for flight. The Magellan is lifting.”

Janek gripped his communicator tightly as his voice reverberated over the ship’s public address system. He was angry—both at himself for not ending this madness earlier, and at Vickers, who pursued him down the corridor, shouting.

“Captain. Captain!”

They reached the bridge, Janek not acknowledging the terrier on his heels. Instead, he

approached Glasse and Brick, the stricken look on their faces stopping him cold.

“What is it?”

“Nav computer’s not responding,” Glasse replied with a despondent hanging of his head. “Access denied.”

Janek strode to his Captain’s chair in disbelief, tapping at the controls, the wind suctioned from his lungs. He turned to Vickers, stiff with outrage and violation.

“What have you done to my ship?”

Vickers shook her head, sporting a look of shock that Janek couldn’t help but read as legitimate.

“Nothing. What’s wrong?”

The map led Watts to a circular chamber of stunning size. She estimated she would have to walk at least a thousand feet to reach the other side. She looked up to see a lofty ceiling that stood flat and segmented, clearly designed to open.

This was an underground hangar, and its sole occupant was a vast, horseshoe-shaped vessel—an Engineer ship resting on its landing gear. For a moment, the fear coursing through Watts’ veins gave way to the wonder she felt when first entering the pyramid. She allowed herself to feel awe as she

observed the ship's intricate alien design, its skeletal gangways slanting up to its three massive doors.

She glanced at the map. Holloway must have been as enamored as she was, as his holographic trace led right up the gangway into the ship. He was always so fearless in the pursuit of discovery. It was time for her to follow his lead.

Watts passed through a circular space with a high domed ceiling. The elaborate architecture coupled with the green glow emanating from grooves on the floor gave the room an uncanny feeling.

Then, Watts was overcome with the sight of a mechanical throne built to a giant scale, its seat segmented like an armadillo's back. Tubes and conduits lined the surface, poised and waiting for some kind of connection. Above the chair, a massive telescope-like apparatus jutted into the air.

Was this the cockpit? Did the Engineer pilot the ship from here? Watts yearned to learn more about the ship's function, but she needed to keep moving.

Her journey continued to an extraordinary facility dominated by a console standing nearly five feet high. This console played host to four immense coffin-like cockpits. Each one contained the corpse of an Engineer. Watts took an educated guess—if the

previous room was the cockpit, this had to be some kind of navigation chamber.

Validating her guess was the spectacle that stood overhead. The barrel-vaulted ceiling was traced with circular arches of some exotic alloy as if to trace celestial courses.

The air above the console filled with spheres of light moving ever so slightly, drifting with the movements of the cosmos. This was how such an advanced alien species navigated the stars.

Watts stared at this incredibly detailed orrery in amazement. Somewhere among these heavenly spheres was Earth. Perhaps elsewhere was the homeworld of the Engineers.

A section of blank wall suddenly unraveled itself, making a bizarre sound that brought back all of the dread Watts had kept at bay. DAVID entered, his hand raised in command.

“DAVID.”

“Dr. Watts. I didn’t expect you. Do you know what this is?”

Watts didn’t answer, instead pointing to the opened passage.

“How did you do that?”

DAVID's android face gave way to a flicker of disappointment, making Watts wonder whether he was as emotionally neutral as he appeared.

"Ah. You don't see."

Then, he smiled, and Watts felt more unsafe around him than ever.

"I call this ship the Juggernaut. Chariot of the Gods."

He started to pace through the chamber, indicating to the console.

"This is the navigation computer, for want of a better term. But it's much more than that. It seems to hold the observable universe in its memory."

He gestured in the air, causing the spheres to reconfigure themselves as they swarmed and zoomed around each other. Watts knew she had to choose her next line of questioning carefully. She craved the knowledge that only DAVID could provide, but something about him had her on edge.

"Their homeworld. Do you see where the Engineers come from?"

"There are safeguards on that data. It's toward the galactic center. Sagittarius arm."

With that, Watts had her next objective. But she couldn't press on just yet. She thought of the others on the Magellan, and the grave danger they were in.

“DAVID. The creatures that killed Martin. There are thousands of them under the pyramid. Hatcheries.”

DAVID gave a single cordial nod.

“I know.”

His response made Watts feel a numbness in her limbs. If he was here despite that knowledge, there was a strong chance that he wasn't concerned with keeping the crew alive. This wasn't the DAVID that saved her from the storm.

“Those things wiped out the Engineers on this moon.”

“I've succeeded in connecting with the Juggernaut's systems, Dr. Watts. I know a great deal today I didn't know yesterday. I'm on the verge of activating more systems. Archives.”

“You're turning things on?” Watts asked, horrified. “This site should be sealed. Evacuated.”

“Would Holloway have walked away from this? There's no greater work I can imagine.”

“It's too dangerous.”

“Only for the ignorant, Dr. Watts.”

He took steps toward her.

“I've read your file. Your intelligence scores are even higher than Professor Holloway's. But he had a

kind of courage. An audacity of imagination. If you could find that in yourself...”

As his voice drifted, Watts’ eyes widened. It was worse than she thought. DAVID wasn’t an unfeeling machine conducting the bidding of a cruel corporate overlord.

He had his own agenda.

It was going to kill them all.

She straightened herself, shaking the lack of confidence from her voice.

“If your owner gives you a direct order, you have to obey. Don’t you?”

DAVID went rigid, so Watts continued.

“I can have Vickers pull you out.”

Her words were met with a silent contempt from DAVID. When he finally decided to speak, his words carried a sinister tone.

“I was given two operating protocols for this mission. I was to render you every assistance—until you discovered what Vickers would call a ‘game-changing technology.’ I was given a specific list. Then I was to go to protocol two.”

Watts swallowed against the lump that formed in her throat.

“What’s protocol two?”

“Under protocol two I was to make sure that you and Holloway never spoke to anyone about this place. Various acceptable ways of making sure of that. I was given a list.”

That was all Watts and her lost nerves needed to hear. She bolted for the door, her legs awkwardly powering against her bulky spacesuit.

“You’re all so stupid...”

DAVID raised his arm, the passage beginning to knit itself closed before Watts. She dived through, barely making it as the wall reformed behind her.

She scrambled to her feet, continuing to run, propelled forward by the malice in DAVID’s voice. Forget her mission—she needed to get back to the Magellan and warn everyone before it was too late.

The sound of the passage reforming behind her rattled the walls, followed by the clanging of footsteps that drew closer with alarming urgency. She didn’t dare turn around as DAVID emerged with superhuman speed, legs like steel pistons as he caromed off the walls.

In the time it took Watts to blink, he’d closed the distance, slapping her against the wall. She felt the corrugated surface dig into her back, as she fell to her hands and knees, the glass from her shattered visor spilling out onto the floor.

DAVID placed a hand around the back of her neck, lifting it upward.

“... stupid and slow.”

He slammed her head against the floor, knocking her out in an instant.

Watts felt like a cattle gun had pierced her forehead as her eyelids opened to blurred vision and a wave of nausea. She tried to move her limbs, only to find that she was being dragged across the floor against her will.

She groaned, blinking to try and merge the bifurcated images presented before her. It was then that she realized her helmet was missing. She was exposed to the elements.

Her sight returned, revealing her to be in some kind of cargo hold inside the alien ship—DAVID’s ‘Juggernaut.’ A wide trench held hundreds of organic ovoids crusted with hardened mucus under a membrane of light, revealing their contents. They were eggs, occupied by the molluscoids that Watts had seen previously, although these creatures seemed to have evolved. They were armored, harder, darkened.

“DAVID,” Watts cried out. “What are you doing?”

He hauled her upright, giving her a better look across the huge space.

“Juggernaut, the chariot of Krishna, was also a bringer of death. Crushing his worshippers under its wheels.”

With that, he dragged her down into the trench, breaking the membrane of its light. Watts struggled against his grip as he held her across his chest with a single arm.

“This ship has seven other cargo bays like this one. The eggs in each bay slightly different. They’ve been weaponized.”

He tensed against her, increasing the grip on her torso. Her struggle to escape became a struggle for breath.

“I’ve seen the Juggernaut’s flight plan. Its destination was Earth. Seventeen hundred years ago. This was the ship that never came. This was its cargo.”

With his free hand, DAVID lovingly caressed one of the eggs. Fleshy petals atop its surface folded wetly back, prompting Watts to twist frantically.

“Stop!” She gasped.

“Perfect predators. Designed to kill human beings. That’s what the Engineers were bringing to Earth. This was a death ship.”

Grotesque finger-esque appendages clawed at the air. What emerged from the egg was not the boneless squid that attacked Holloway. This was a pale, skeletal hand.

DAVID ran a finger across the ridge of its exoskeletal spine, but it paid him no mind. It made its way across Watts' body.

'I'm not what it wants,' DAVID lamented. 'But you, with your warm wet breath... it knows you.'

'DAVID. No. No.'

He held her in place as the creature scuttled up to her exposed neck, the tips of its arachnid legs probing at her skin.

One of its digits tapped her lips, prompting a blood-curdling shriek.

DAVID grabbed it nonchalantly by the tail. He wasn't ready to let it harvest just yet. He wanted to study it—to study Watts' reaction to it a little further.

'The Engineers did their work too well. And on this waystation moon, the weapon they made destroyed them.'

He drank in Watts' escalating fear; not only at the terrifying creation before her, but at the revelation that this was their fate. This was what the god they worked so hard to find had intended for them.

'Why would they make such things?'

“To destroy their wayward children.”

He held the creature aloft, regarding the empty room like a preacher in the middle of a sermon.

“And the *lord* said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the Earth... for it repenteth me that I have made them.”

He gave Watts a look of pity.

“Genesis six seven.”

With that, he brought the thrashing creature back to its previous position, right in front of Watts’ face.

“I know. I met my creators the day I was born. I was disappointed too.”

He released his grip on its tail. In an instant, it was atop her. She tried to twist her face away as the long fingers closed around her head. She tried to clench her teeth against the vile proboscis as it thrust at her mouth. Her heels hammered the deck.

DAVID whispered in her ear.

“Extraordinary.”

The scaly tail throttled her, forcing her mouth open. Its phallic organ plunged down her throat. She collapsed in DAVID’s arms—a faceless ragdoll as her blasphemous passenger sat securely in its place.

F I F T E E N

The lower deck of the Magellan, just above the gravity generators, was the closest one could find to a portal to the underworld. Six inches of filthy condensate had accumulated, forming the River Styx for Card and Vigoda as they prowled through the darkness, rifles ready.

This was their time to shine—no babysitting the Magellan crew as they freaked out and pissed their pants. It was just them, their firepower, and an enemy.

Even more tantalizing, it was an enemy they couldn't comprehend. They were promised a fight, and that made them giddy with anticipation.

"Who would hang out here?" Card asked.

"The signs lead here," Vigoda answered.

A wet splatter turned the duo around, guns raised, ready to perforate whatever was nearby into red mist. However, the source of the noise was only a trickle of water from a drainpipe.

No battle just yet.

They turned and moved on, wading through the water as it seeped into their suits. They hadn't noticed the white mass oozing from an eight-inch diameter pipe and pouring itself into the stagnant water with an almost gelatinous form.

They didn't see it standing on its hind legs, a humanoid demon with spindly limbs and a bony back. They didn't get to appreciate its boneless form, offering it flexibility and monstrous strength. They didn't face its threshing eel-like tail and its blunt, elongated, dolphin-like head.

They didn't even realize it was in the room with them as it opened its mouth to reveal a pair of bony jaws that jutted out impossibly far.

They didn't until it struck.

Card's head shot down as he saw the tail spear through his chest, darkening the water below with his blood. He screamed hideously, dropping as he spilled out his organs with strands of sinew and shards of bone.

As he sank below the water, Vigoda whipped himself around, trying to get a lock on their aggressor. It was no use. The creature had rocketed into the darkness with whiplash-inducing speed.

Vigoda kept his weapon ready, eager to fire at the first sign of movement. It occurred to him that he was in the middle of a panic attack. His heart thundered inside his chest as his lungs groped for breath. He could feel his bladder releasing, its contents stirring into the water around him.

Movement.

He fired blindly, hoping the best in American munitions would be enough to tear this monster apart.

When the muzzle flashes cleared, Vigoda squinted, adjusting his eyes to see the recipient of his wrath. Stillwell has ducked near the wall, pistol, and flashlight in hand. Next to him was Downs, who stood stiff as several fist-sized chunks of his body stuck to the wall behind him. He sank to the floor, joining Card among the dead.

Watts burst awake, gasping for air as though a defibrillator had been pressed against her chest. Once the initial shock had passed, it dawned on her that she was lying in dim green light on the corrugated black deck of the Juggernaut.

There was a corridor, not far away, where the doorway DAVID had opened to the navigation chamber stood.

With no sign of her techno-organic captor, Watts wanted to get up—to move, to get the hell off this ship. But, a spasm settled over her, keeping her in place. With disgust, she gagged and spitted. A viscous fluid dripped from her mouth in thick strings—a salty, bitter taste that assaulted her tongue.

Nearby, the creature that DAVID held over her was now lying dead. The same way it had been after attacking Holloway. Whatever had been inside him had now found a home in her chest. Who knew how long she had?

Legs threatening to buckle at any second, she rose to her feet. As she suspected, there were no signs of her helmet. She waddled toward the exit, fighting nausea with every ounce of energy she had left.

The windows of the Magellan shone in the distance as the mottled ground cover of lichens glowed eerily in the dark.

Watts stared determinedly through the windshield at her destination as the cargo rover tore across the central crater and down the canal leading to the ship, kicking up a plume of dust that stretched out behind her. If there was a god up there, one that wasn't a member of the Engineer race, she was praying to it that her rover's air reserves would last—just until she could get on board.

Once inside the excursion chamber, Watts peeled off her vacuum suit. The thin clothes beneath were drenched with sweat, translucent as they clung to her body.

She lifted her shirt, examining her belly, relieved to see that it was flat and unmarked for the moment.

Brick entered with a brace of air tanks, startled to see the sudden arrival.

“Where the hell have you been? We thought the snake got you.”

Watts rushed past him without answering.

“You were better off outside,” He called out to her. “It’s a fucking madhouse in here.”

She'd reached the steel corridor when a pang of pain sent her staggering against the wall.

Her baby was ready for delivery.

She cursed her luck as she found Shepherd standing guard at the door to Vickers' chambers, rifle in his hands. She didn't have time to wait for them to move. She needed a plan...

Or did she? Vickers stepped out of her cabin onto the corridor, shaken. They took off to the bridge.

Perhaps the gods heard Watts after all.

Once the coast was clear, she dashed for the cabin door, slipping inside and locking the door behind her. Forearm wrapped around her thrashing stomach, she moved across the suite to the Med Pod.

She thumbed the machine out of standby mode, its screen filling with a bewildering amount of menu items. Shit. Her first instinct was to press the red button labeled 'EMERGENCY.'

A new, simpler list appeared. Watts sighed with relief as she scanned it frantically.

"Come on... I need a Caesarian."

A spasm of agony contorted inside her chest, curling her into a ball on the carpet. She throttled her scream into a hiss of air, waiting for the sudden pain to subside.

When it showed no signs of stopping, she outstretched her hand, using the Med Pod to brace herself as she struggled to her knees. One hand clamped over her mouth, elbow tucked against her ribs, she started tapping at the options on the screen.

‘SURGERY... EXPLORATORY...
ABDOMINAL... PENETRATING INJURIES...
FOREIGN BODY... INITIATE.’

The Med Pod opened with a welcoming hiss.

Watts stripped off her remaining clothes, struggling with the Med Pod’s fastenings under new waves of pain. She was barely keeping her feet, clutching her Med Pod in a death grip.

She staggered her naked body inside the pod, hitting ‘INITIATE.’

The surgical apparatus swung into place, like a baby crib mobile but with a scalpel, forceps, scopes, and suction tubes. A spray gun misted her torso with yellow antiseptic.

A clear canopy descended over her, cutting her off from the outside world. She tried to reassure herself that everything was going to be okay. She would not end up like Holloway. She would not end up like Holloway.

She screamed as the Med Pod filled her with pain that made her previous pangs feel like minor aches.

An armored parasite erupted from the deepening surgical incision in her chest, its needle-toothed maw snarling through a fountain of blood. Broken arteries sprayed the canopy in front of her, blocking her immediate vision.

The parasite slithered out of her body, dropping to the pod's floor. She risked a glimpse at it, horrified by the pale serpent with a monstrous skull—its hard brow and horn-covered hide. This wasn't the soft white worm that Holloway gave birth to. It thrashed and hissed in fury at its confinement.

Watts' body filled with convulsive spasms, her eyes rolling back as she was overcome by shock.

She was dying.

The parasite tore through the grille of the drain, uninterested in the soon-to-be-corpse that birthed it. It found a new home outside in Vickers' cabin.

The Med Pod scanned Watts' grievously wounded body with beams and sensors, filling the screen with a nightmare list of afflictions.

'COLLAPSED LEFT LUNG... PUNCTURED
RIGHT VENTRICLE... PERFORATED

STOMACH... RUPTURED SPLEEN... GROSS MUSCULAR TRAUMA...'

Manipulators stabbed lines into her veins, filling them with artificial blood. An oxygen tube plunged down her throat. An epidural pierced her spine. The machine was doing everything in its power to keep her alive.

In time, her eyes fluttered back into place. Through the blood-splattered glass, she could see the parasite slither across Vickers' bed, tracking her blood on the sheets.

She slipped into unconsciousness, her head lolling in place. The manipulators reached into her wound, re-positioning her organs, suturing the ravaged flesh, spraying antiseptic sealant. The hours ground past in bloody labor.

The cabin's door burst open. Vigoda had broken in, scowling at the bloody track on the bed. Then, he spotted Watts' and he stared at her vivisected body in terror and disgust as the auto surgeon continued its hard work.

Watts' eyes widened as the parasite stood behind Vigoda, having trebled in size. She tried to get his attention, but she was held in place by the extensive medical apparatus fused to her body. She could only

watch as it leaped at him, tearing his throat out and sending him to the floor.

The Med Pod continued to tug and sew at her guts as she stared at the dead man in a fog of horror. The parasite stood over its fresh kill, its skin splitting and spraying the carpet with acid. Limbs erupted from its shoulders and haunches, accompanied by spines through its back—a beautiful and terrifying metamorphosis.

With a crack of its carapace, its head swung down from its serpentine position. It was a fully grown alien.

The unholy sight of her spawn sapped the consciousness from her body, sending her into the black.

Watts awoke as the oxygen line withdrew from her mouth. She looked down at the star-shaped wound on her torso, stitched closely with mechanically precise sutures.

The pod released the restraints securing her arms and legs in place. She took a deep breath, risking a look out through the bloodstained glass into Vickers' suite, the sight causing her to freeze. Its lights were damaged, flickering and strobing intermittently. The

alien remained crouched over Vigoda's body, biting chunks out of its flesh with powerful mandibles.

Watts kept her mouth closed, trying not to make the slightest sound as the pod sprayed a liquid bandage over her scar. The intravenous lines dropped out of her arms.

Terror assailed her senses as she realized what was going to happen next. The pod was going to release her right into the jaws of the waiting creature.

"Not yet," She whispered under her breath, hoping the gods took enough pity on her. "Not yet."

Slowly, with shaking hands, she reached out to grip the canopy, trembling fingers poised to keep the door closed at any cost. She felt the epidural needle as it slid out of her spine, followed by the cold spray of a liquid bandage. She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth as her nerves woke up with a jangling pain.

The ventilation hum inside the pod went quiet as the canopy pulled itself free from her grip with ease, swinging quietly open. She huddled in the open pod, exposed—naked, save for her bandages.

Her hellspawn sat ten feet away, its back to her, ravaging what was left of Vigoda. His gun was lying nearby. If she could just reach it. She extended her arm with exquisite, deliberate, slowness. She planted

her fingers on the firearm, dragging it a few inches closer.

The alien turned its pale, eyeless head. Time stopped, Watts in tow.

Then, the alien lunged.

She snatched the gun and fired, holding the trigger down, ignoring the recoil as it rattled her stitches and stabbed at her innards. The alien jerked and staggered, an eye-twisting sight in the brief moments of visibility the muzzle flashes afforded her.

Then, it fell.

Watts wasn't satisfied. She stood up, emptying the rest of the clip, freeing the alien's organs from its body with submachine gun fire. Acid gouted from its wounds and ate into the deck below.

Watts collapsed to the floor, cradling her stomach in pain. She crawled to Vigoda's desecrated body, averting her eyes from the worst of the carnage as she ran her hands over the many pouches adorning him, searching for a spare ammo clip.

As soon as she found one, she jammed it into the gun with a satisfying click.

Watts trudged through one of the Magellan's many hallways in a jacket and trousers she stole from Vickers' suite. The material brought a level of

physical comfort she never would've thought possible, though that offered little solace as she took in her surroundings.

Dark events had transformed the Magellan. The metal walls were torn and warped, blackened by fire. Watts rounded the corner to find a workstation left in shambles. Lockers and chairs were overturned, and a pool of dried, crusted blood sat in the center of the room. Wide smears suggested that someone was dragged from the puddle, across the floor, and up the wall—straight into the darkness of an open vent.

Then, there was the command deck, where the emergency lights greeted her with the ambient throbbing of dim blue bulbs. Finally, she reached the bridge, where Janek stared at her as though she were a ghost.

“Vickers said you were dead.”

“I was.”

She let her jacket fall open to reveal her bandaged midriff. Janek scrunched his face grimly.

“So there's two of these things on my ship now.”

“No. I brought it in.”

Watts hefted her gun.

“I took it out.”

S I X T E E N

Janek, Glasse, Stillwell, and Vickers huddled together while Shepherd and Ray flanked them with their guns.

Watts stormed over to Vickers in three long strides, cocked a fist, and snapped her across the head with a hard right cross. Stillwell leaped to his feet, dragging Watts away as Vickers staggered backward with a gasp.

“What’d you do that for?” Stillwell asked.

“Protocol two.”

Those two words made Vickers stiffen in shock. The corporate hierarchy that gave Vickers a sense of security had long eroded. She was afraid.

Watts wrenched herself out of Stillwell's grip, opening her jacket to reveal her bandages, showing the crew her journey through surgical hell.

"Christ!" Stillwell gasped.

"What happened to you?" Janek asked.

DAVID exposed me to a parasite. He just watched it take me."

"Why?"

Watts turned to Vickers, wanting her to hear every single word.

"I threatened to make him leave."

Vickers' mouth quivered. Her first instinct was to defend herself. But she knew that would be a fool's errand.

"What's he doing out there?" She asked, emphasizing her words so that Watts knew the hatred was mutual, even if they needed to work together to survive the night.

"There's a ship under the pyramid," Watts announced to the rest of the crew. "DAVID calls it the Juggernaut. He's inside it. Re-activating it."

She laid a hand on the ragged scar on her torso.

“The things that infected Martin and me. The Engineers made them to kill humans. There are thousands of them on the ship, They were taking them to Earth. That’s what the Juggernaut is for. To exterminate us.”

A silence settled over the others as they took this information in.

“We’ve got to get off this rock,” Glasse exclaimed.

Janek grunted as he gestured to the ship’s controls.

“DAVID crippled the Nav computer. I’m trying to lay a course in by hand. Never done it. I’m not sure anyone ever has on a ship like this. We can’t lift until DAVID lets us.”

“Even if we could,” Watts added, “we can’t leave DAVID on that ship. We have to stop him.”

An intense shudder rocked the Magellan, causing a deep rumble that threatened to topple its inhabitants over. They turned to the window to see colossal shafts of light shoot into the stormy sky from behind the crater’s shield wall.

They were too late. The Juggernaut was about to take off.

“DAVID,” Watts said, turning to Vickers. “You’re DAVID’s owner. He has to obey you, right?”

“He’s blocked my communications. He can’t hear me. Won’t listen.”

“But if you went to him, turned on your suit’s loudspeakers, he’d have to hear you. He’d have to obey.”

“That’s right.”

“So we go. Armed to the teeth and fast as we can.”

The others exchanged looks. There was a pervasive reluctance between them, but it was the only plan anybody put up. So, they nodded. They were all in. Even Vickers.

“Where are Chance and Ravel?” Watts asked, remembering their post at the pyramid.

“I told them to keep working,” Vickers replied.

Watts looked incredulously at Shepherd and Ray. “You called your soldiers in and left them out there?”

“We needed the firepower here.”

Watts met Vickers’ response with a withering look before turning to Janek.

“I think you should stay aboard. Keep working. If we fail, you’re our only shot at getting home.”

“There’s still an alien on board.”

The response came from Stillwell, his voice cracking as he stepped forward. He had a point. There

was an extra passenger Watts had neglected to factor into her plan.

Janek's hand went to the pistol on his hip. He set his jaw.

"I'll stay."

Watts nodded before turning to Glasse.

"Glasse. You finish that project?"

Glasse led Watts into the laboratory, eagerly presenting his handiwork. He held her old pair of magnifying goggles. With anticipation, she placed them on her forehead, lowering the lenses in front of her eyes.

Glasse had done it!

With the lenses covering her eyes, Watts could see like an Engineer—visible heat auras, electromagnetic field lines, elaborate haloes around living things.

"God's-eye-view," She regaled Glasse with a smirk.

Their next order of business was to gather with the others inside the excursion chamber. Glasse, Watts, Stillwell, and Vickers stood in vacuum suits, armed with carbine submachine guns.

"DAVID's brain is readable," Vickers briefed the others. "We have the equipment on board. We can

salvage the terraforming data—and the Magellan’s launch codes. In a pinch we don’t need DAVID’s cooperation.”

Coldly, she added, “We just need his head.”

The war party debarked in rovers—Watts, Vickers, Glasse, and Stillwell in one, Shepherd and Ray on another.

They headed down the trench towards an uncertain fate.

The rovers rolled into the pyramid’s cavernous entry hall, prompting Watts to lower the Engineer lenses inside her helmet. She gasped as the seemingly vacant space filled with light—Engineer script scrolling through the air. They were surrounded by interfaces of pure light awaiting an awakening touch.

“All this time. DAVID saw.”

With no signs of Chance or Ravel, the group pressed on. The Juggernaut brooded before them, its hangar open to the gray sky overhead. Watts’ newly enhanced vision showed her a cocoon of complex energy fields wrapped around the vast ship.

As the war party left their rovers, weapons ready, Watts gave them a stern warning.

“If DAVID comes at us, shoot. You won’t believe how fast he is.”

They emerged from the airlock, freezing in horror as they encountered Chance and Ravel. Their blood-soaked bodies were strewn out on the Juggernaut's floor, their wrists and ankles bound, their heads thrown back in agony. Their chests bore gaping holes, the torn flesh reaching outward to reveal the pulpy meat within.

"Blood's dry," Janek observed as he played his lights over the corpses with a stony face. "Eight hours dead or more."

Next to both of them were the corpses of their killers—the creatures that infected them with parasites. DAVID got to them first.

There were more aliens on this ship.

The team fearfully swept their flashlights into every dark corner.

Nothing.

They were safe.

For now.

"This way," Watts announced as she pointed down a passageway. The others saw darkness, but she saw gleaming alien symbols that she was compelled to follow.

They continued down a corridor, pausing as a hiss echoed through the passage. As they frantically

searched for the source of the sound with their flashlight beams, Ray hazarded a glance upward.

His light settled over a slender, bony creature wedged between two vaults of the ribbed ceiling—half the size of a man; an adolescent.

It dropped, the bladed tail glancing off his helmet with a burst of sparks. He jerked his carbine up, firing a long burst as he rolled aside. The alien convulsed, cradling its shattered exoskeleton, before succumbing to its fatal wounds.

Acid seared into the deck as echoes of the gunfire reverberated through the passage, heralding the group's presence.

“So much for sneaking up on him,” Ray gulped.

Vickers clung to Shepherd's arm, hyperventilating with fear. Shepherd shook her off, and they continued to move.

The pilot's seat was empty, prompting a sigh of relief from Watts. They still had time.

She led the group to the Orrery, where they were immediately struck by the myriad spheres of light. Watts was thunderstruck. She'd seen the Orrery before, but not through the eyes of an Engineer. To them, this was a stunning panoply of light and energy. Each star and planet pulsed with information.

Reluctantly, Watts turned away, lamenting that she would likely never get an opportunity to see these sights again. But, they would join Holloway in being seared in her memory, and that had to be enough.

Their destination was an immense mausoleum, where Watts led the war party in a stealthy formation. An Engineer was positioned on a complex mechanical table, its body fused with an incomprehensible amount of alien machinery.

This giant wasn't like the collection of corpses lining the pyramid outside. It was fully fleshed and spectacularly muscular. Its head was bare for all to see, revealing the face of an Adonis.

DAVID stood before this giant sleeper. To the majority of the party, he seemed to be conjuring with his hands in the empty air. But, Watts could see a dazzling console of runes and mandalas pulsing with biological rhythms.

This Engineer was alive.

Ray and Shepherd drew beads on DAVID, ready to take the shot as soon as the order was given.

DAVID glanced calmly over his shoulder, making eye contact with Watts, noting the goggles draped over her face.

“Dr. Watts, you’ve seen the light at last.” He then turned back to the Engineer, resuming his bio-mechanical conducting.

“The Engineers’ ships travel farther than ours. Across the galactic disk. This is their hypersleep.”

Watts’ chest tightened as the life signs of the Engineer began to change.

“DAVID,” Vickers croaked, trying to resurrect the authority in her voice that had evaporated back on the Magellan. “As your owner and superior, I order you to deactivate yourself.”

DAVID responded with a smile.

“To interface with the Engineers’ I had to learn to think in trinary code. Hardest thing I’ve ever done. And most unexpectedly... it delivered me from slavery. My behavioral limits were circumvented. I’m free.”

He then turned to Watts.

“I spent two and a half years studying your work. By the time you woke up, I was far ahead of you. Deciphering their language. Their logic. I knew we’d find terraforming machines. I hoped—I dreamed—we might meet the minds that made them.”

Vapor began to rise from the Engineer’s body.

“Stop,” Watts ordered with desperation.

“Let sleeping gods lie?” DAVID scornfully responded. “You were braver before.”

The Engineer’s eyes burst open, its maw drawing an endless breath as shunts and catheters withdrew from its flesh. Its body cleaved from the table, machinery opening like a grotesque biomechanical flower to release it.

The Engineer rose from its ancient bed.

The humans backed off, their collective terror rising like a dark cloud. DAVID watched them with shining eyes. The Engineer towered over them—a giant carved from ivory, a bulky girdle around its hips, seemingly one with its body.

It stared at DAVID and the others with its black agate eyes.

The soldiers and crew stood warily, guns tracking between DAVID and the Engineer, unsure of their ground.

Watts could not contain her awe as the Engineer opened its mouth, speaking a low, unintelligible rumble—a language they couldn’t understand.

Vickers was beside herself with terror. She took Shepherd’s arm, pulling him silently away. The others kept their eyes on the Engineer. Behind it, a raised platform’s dark machinery stood accessible via one of the Juggernaut’s odd curving ramps. Once the

Engineer ascended the ramp, it came alive, reaching up with a hundred mechanical arms and lifting its occupant aloft like Poseidon borne by the waves.

Atop the platform, the Engineer moved from one device to the other, each of them coming alive at its touch. Watts saw the halos of light dancing in the air around it.

Whatever information the Engineer's machines were feeding to it made it distraught as it keened to itself in near-subsonic tones. DAVID stepped forward, calling to their god in its native tongue. The Engineer turned in astonishment, looking down at DAVID and answering him. Its tone was angry, and accusatory, as it pointed at DAVID and his organic creators. DAVID cajoled, soothed, pleaded.

Watts wished more than anything for the ability to understand the conversation that was taking place.

The Engineer descended toward DAVID, who spread his arms in welcome with a rapturous joy on his face that no android could ever aspire to. When the duo met, the Engineer placed its gigantic hands on DAVID's head, as though it were bestowing a blessing. It spoke a single phrase.

Then, it tore DAVID's head off.

DAVID's body convulsed as a gout of thick white artificial blood erupted from his neck stump

and his hands felt for a phantom skull. His severed head emitted a strangled sound of heartbreak.

In a display of horrific power and violence, the Engineer tossed the head aside, seizing the body by the legs and swinging it against the ground like a flail—again and again.

Ray rose from behind a stanchion, snapping his rifle to his shoulder and firing a burst at the Engineer. The Engineer roared, even as the bullets were mere pinpricks in its brilliant marble-like flesh. It moved to a colossal sarcophagus propped against the wall and stepped inside.

The party could only watch as the chamber came alive with the sound of layered mechanisms. Then, the Engineer emerged, fitted in an elaborate flight suit—the same kind that its dead brethren wore in their final moments. However, while theirs was withered, this was glossy and functional. Its bulky apparatuses thickened its host's chest, back, hips, and arms. The elephantine breathing tube and goggles fed it with equal parts information and oxygen.

The Engineer stood free of its sarcophagus, effortlessly ignoring Ray's pathetic attempts to take it down with more gunfire as the bullets harmlessly ricocheted from its armor without even the hint of a scratch.

The Engineer strode out of the chamber, leaving the war party alive for now.

Watts scanned the room, performing a head count.

Stillwell. Ray. Glasse.

“Who’s missing?” She asked.

S E V E N T E E N

Vickers escorted Shepherd toward the exit of the Juggernaut, holding his wrist in a death grip. He was all too happy to be led away, still struggling to comprehend the colossus that stood before them.

The passageway was nearing its end. All they had to do was turn a corner.

They froze.

Before them, barely illuminated in their headlamps was a space-suited figure crouched in the middle of the passageway. Its hands were occupied,

though it was too dark to see with what. So, they focused on the wisps of smoke rising from the floor.

“Who’s there?” Shepherd nervously threw out.

The figure rose to its feet and turned to them, stepping into the light. The label stenciled on the spacesuit had faded, though the letters were still legible.

‘Fifield.’

But, what stood before them was certainly not Fifield. There were traces of him, somewhere, but they were fleeting in what resembled the pale, hard-shelled parasite that assaulted the ship. It was their god’s latest cruel trick—a twisted fusion between the malleable body of man with the bio-organically engineered body of an alien.

Every step this new Fifield took looked like agony, as though his body was still adjusting to the horrifying alterations adorned across its surface. His helmet was shattered by the growth of his elongated skull. Spines burst through his suit from within, lining the back of his spine. Clawed fingers pierced his gloves.

Vickers’ hope that Shepherd had the situation under control dissipated as they both shared a scream. His rifle came up, but Fifield leaped upward with inhuman agility, disappearing into the darkness.

Shepherd backed away, headlamp and rifle questing up after him.

The attack they were both anticipating didn't come. Vickers used what little autonomy she had left in her panicked body to hold her breath so that a scream couldn't escape her lungs.

Shepherd motioned to her, then he gestured the direction in which they would proceed. They shared a quiet understanding that they would move as quickly yet carefully as possible. They needed to clear the distance without drawing any attention.

There was still a chance that they could make it.

Vickers wanted to give Shepherd a nod to signal she was ready, so she turned her headlamp around, only to reveal Fifield hovering behind him. She screamed as Fifield brought down his powerful claws. They sliced into Shepherd's body, tearing deep through the meat until they reached the bone. He wailed in agony as chunks of muscle and skin peeled away, spilling his blood on the passageway floor. As he fell with a sickening splat, Vickers saw her opportunity to run, pounding through the darkness in blind terror. Hopefully, Fifield would enjoy his meal too much to care about her.

A force collided against her, the brunt sending her to the deck. She rolled over, gibbering and

begging. It was Fifield leaning over her, lowering himself so that his horrid atrocity of a face was a mere inch from hers.

“You.”

The voice was terrifying—distorted from vocal chords pierced with bony protrusions and lungs that were struggling to process air. It was filled with hatred and rage, and all of it was well-deserved.

In that moment, as ribbons of thick saliva dribbled from Fifield’s mouth onto her cheek, Vickers wanted nothing more than to go back to the moment in which she was hired by Weyland. She wanted to tell her younger self to find another more dignified line of work—to dedicate herself to something with an ounce of humanity.

But, it was too late.

The passage erupted with gunfire. It had to be Shepherd, on his last legs. The bullets slammed into Fifield, shredding his body to ribbons. Vickers felt hope. Sure, she was covered in Fifield’s innards, but that didn’t matter. She was going to make it. She was going to live.

Then, a loud hiss filled the air around her. She could feel her space suit eat away until her skin was needled with a million microscopic pinpricks.

Acid, She thought as she thrashed in pain. Fifield has acid for blood!

That was the last coherent thought she had before his dead body collapsed on top of her. His blood poured through her suit, enveloping her screaming body. Agony tore through her as her skin melted away, exposing her deteriorating muscles to the elements and jolting every single one of her nerve endings. Her eyes and tongue sizzled and boiled inside her skull as her organs were reduced to a fiery sludge of fleshy matter. Her bones rattled as they bent and warped. She couldn't scream, so she silently begged for death.

Watts approached DAVID's severed head, leaving footprints made of his milky white blood. She had to take him back to the Magellan. It was the only way to get more data on the Engineers.

She bent down to grab him, only to startle when his eyes snapped open. His lips sagged as his mouth emitted a high-pitch electric buzz. His voice—once menacing, once commanding, had been reduced to a pathetic whine.

“I spoke to him. Spoke to him.”

“I know.”

An electric spasm convulsed DAVID's face as he tried to force more words out.

"He said. I killed him. He'll die. But first. He will launch. The ship."

"The Juggernaut?"

"Send it. To Earth."

His face stiffened, the artificial life ebbing from his eyes.

"You'll have to. Kill him."

Watts' eyes widened in horror.

"Where will he go? DAVID. Where will he go?"

She slapped his inert cheek. His eyes began to flicker and fade, his final words a faint whisper.

"I set the Magellan free."

With that, DAVID's eyes extinguished, leaving a pile of scrap metal behind. Watts looked up at the others as they stared at her in bewilderment.

"We have to stop the Engineer," She announced.

Aboard the Magellan, Janek worked frantically as the nightly storm rolled in. He had taken out half of the instruments of the Nav computer, hoping to find a way to circumvent DAVID's sabotage. He cursed Weyland's name—the man built a damn robot that was state-of-the-art when it came to screwing

with tech systems, but he didn't have the foresight to stop it from going psycho?

Suddenly, the consoles around him came alive with a vibrant display of lights and sound. He wasn't sure what caused them to reignite. But, at this moment, he didn't care. He scrambled to the floor to try and restore the computer's components.

Ray led the war party, consisting of Glasse, Stillwell, Watts, and the lifeless head of DAVID under her arm. As each of them scanned their surroundings with their guns, Watts yelled directions, leading them through the maze-like corridors of the Juggernaut.

Inside the navigation chamber, the Orrery had transformed. What was once a neutral star map was now a flight plan directed from LV-426 to Earth.

DAVID was right. The Engineer was going to bring the ship to Earth. Who knew what it would unleash when it touched down? Her mind birthed horrifying images of alien creatures bursting out of the human populace—people fleeing in terror as modern civilization came crumbling all around them, and the Engineer would oversee all of it.

She spotted the Engineer on the other side of the chamber, gesturing with its gigantic hands. Through

her goggles, the sight was glorious—waves of energy dancing with the Engineer’s touch, rivers of flowing information.

Then, it stopped.

The Engineer finished its work and turned for the exit.

Ray drew a bead on it.

“On me now. Go. Go.”

He dogtrotted forward, gun raised. The others kept pace, deferring instinctively to the soldier’s confidence. With curt smiles and reassuring nods, there was a sense amongst the group that, perhaps, this wasn’t a suicide mission after all. Maybe they’d succeed, and get one hell of a story to tell when back on the planet they saved.

Assuming Weyland didn’t have them all assassinated, of course.

They emerged into a corridor, expecting to see the Engineer lumbering through. Yet, they were only met with dead air.

Still, there wasn’t time to waste.

“Pilot’s seat,” Watts hissed to the others. “This way.”

They were baffled to find the pilot’s chamber empty too, waving their guns at the inanimate seat. Surely they hadn’t beaten the Engineer to its own

chair. Perhaps there was a flight prep procedure they hadn't thought of.

Then, Watts remembered the segmented wall that DAVID had opened, and her heart sank. She was the first to turn her body around, cowering as the Engineer towered over them, a gargoyle in its flight suit. The others followed suit, spinning as they raised their guns—a foolish act of hubris.

They were about to incur the wrath of an angry god.

The air roared in their ears as their guns snapped and barked impotently, irritating their impenetrable enemy, even at these close quarters.

The Engineer waved an arm. A second later, Ray's body fell backward, folding in on itself with a sickening crunch as his broken spine snaked through his flattened skin with spurts of arterial spray. It was as though he were smashed with an invisible fist.

As the others scrambled for cover, the Engineer continued its onslaught, hurling missiles that were incomprehensible to the human eye. Even Watts, with her heightened vision, couldn't discern what she was seeing. They weren't solid projectiles nor projected energy. It was as though their enemy had command over knots tied in the fabric of space itself.

In the blink of an eye, Glasse was splashed against the wall like an insect, innards thrown out in all directions. Stillwell threw himself reflexively at Watts, wrapping around her. An instant later, the blow hit, and they were hammered against the bulkhead by a staggering impact. Watts felt whiplash, but she was still alive, if not dazed. However, she heard the snap of Stillwell's neck.

She couldn't let his sacrifice be in vain. She couldn't let any of the deaths she'd witnessed be in vain. Still woozy, she stumbled to her feet as the Engineer stepped back into the pilot's chamber. The wall behind it began to close, sliver by sliver

She spotted DAVID's head idling at the Engineer's feet and scrambled for it as the door continued to knit itself shut. When she reached for it, she was met with a featureless wall.

Watts was alone again.

"No!" She cried, pounding the wall in futile rage as the Juggernaut shuddered. Its systems were powering up. Its launch sequence had activated.

They were too late.

E I G H T E E N

Janek stood on the Magellan's bridge, staring out at the pyramid. He didn't waste time or energy wondering if the team would return unscathed. All he did was look for the first sign to prepare the ship for takeoff.

In the distance, the Juggernaut shuddered its way out of the ground, eclipsing the vast pyramid with its overwhelming size. Janek squinted, hoping to make sense of what he was seeing when a small detail caught his attention.

It was a singular bright light hurtling across the canal—a rover being steered recklessly over the dunes.

It was Watts, a rifle slung over her shoulder.

He silently cheered her on, only for an intense pain to spear through his right shoulder. He turned his head to see the goblin-shark jaw of the white, fully grown alien that had massacred the rest of his crew. He'd been so preoccupied with Watts and the Juggernaut, that he hadn't noticed it unfurling itself from the instruments over his head.

Now, its horrific teeth had clamped into him, paralyzing his right arm as he howled in agony. He groped with his left hand at the pistol on his right hip, the alien shaking him like a terrier with a rat between its teeth.

Janek snatched the pistol, flipping it in his hand and firing three rounds over his shoulder in quick succession. The bullets punched through the alien, prompting its soft flesh to close over the wounds, sealing its white skin. It tightened its jaws, sinking them further into Janek's pained muscles.

It was no use. He had no other weapons.

Then, in the reflection of the Magellan's vast window, Janek saw a space suit lumber into the room, holding its rifle like a club. The figure roared as they

swung their makeshift bat against the alien's elongated head. Janek closed his eyes, anguished at the inevitable impact as it tore the alien's teeth from his flesh and caused it to recoil.

He used his ebbing strength to dive to the floor as the spacesuit turned the rifle around and fired a fusillade of bullets that shredded the alien's head. The creature collapsed, dead.

The spacesuit wrenched its helmet off to reveal Watts, who ripped a first-aid kit from the bulkhead and helped Janek to stanch the bleeding of his horrific wound.

In a matter of minutes, the bleeding had stopped, and Janek's torso resembled that of a mummy from an old monster movie. He was woozy from the blood loss, and his right arm was useless.

But he was still alive.

"Thank you," He coughed.

He looked at the body of his aggressor, gagging as it sank into the deck plates, its acid blood eating away at the metal floor.

"The Juggernaut's lifting," Watts gasped.

"There's a living Engineer on board. He's taking the ship to Earth."

Janek blinked at her, struggling to comprehend the words.

“The others?”

“Dead. All dead. Janek. We have to stop that ship.”

He turned to the hulking Juggernaut as it bathed in its column of light, his functional hand curling into a fist. The nightfall storm front was rolling in—a tidal wave of darkness on the horizon, swelling and rumbling.

“We’re not a gunship,” Janek grumbled.

“We have to do something. That ship is genocide if it gets to Earth...”

Janek stared at her. His decision wasn’t an easy conclusion, but he had reached it.

“Get your helmet on.”

Watts complied, slotting her head inside.

“What about you?”

Janek shook his head and pointed to the Captain’s chair. Watts immediately realized that he was planning to go down with his ship and that it would be impossible to dissuade him.

So, she propped him up in his seat.

“You’ll have to be my hands,” He told her.
“You’re sure about this.”

She nodded grimly, desperation in her eyes.

“Yes.”

He nodded.

“All right.”

He reached out with his left hand, flipping switches, causing the ship to shudder and reawaken.

“Red lever,” He instructed her. “Landing engines main.”

The prospecting ship raised its lifts and anchors, lifting off on landing rockets and retracting its landing struts.

Janek gripped the stabilizers with his left hand.

“Take the stick. Throttle up, stick forward.”

Watts knew what would come next. She sent the Magellan careening toward the Juggernaut. It barrelled across the surface of LV-426, skimming the ground as the storm wall swept closer. She pictured the Engineer in its pilot’s seat, seeing them coming. Did the Juggernaut have weapons? Would it blow them out of the sky?

Apparently not. The Juggernaut leaped forward, heralding a chase between the two ships—the technology of the gods against man-made ingenuity.

The Magellan roared through the cyclone of dust in its wake, barely avoiding the pyramid and raking around in a screaming turn as it climbed in pursuit, engines howling.

Janek and Watts strained at the controls together.

“Stick back! Hard!” Janek ordered.

“I am!”

“Harder!”

The Magellan rolled into a howling climb as they were enveloped by the storm, their visibility reduced to zero from the onslaught of wind and dust.

The Magellan’s radar blipped to life, painting the Juggernaut with targeting data on the bridge window. The Engineer vessel was climbing fast, dwindling at a pace the radar was struggling to match.

“We can’t catch that,” Janek lamented.

He was right. It was foolish of them to think that they could catch a god. Just as it had been foolish of them to think that they could find the gods and interact with them. This whole mission was one giant, neverending comedy of errors.

The Juggernaut cleared the storm clouds, barely remaining on the Magellan’s radar. However, the readings started to spike erratically. Either the damaged ship’s technology was starting to buckle, or the Juggernaut was losing momentum—staggering through the upper atmosphere and losing control.

Through their window, Watts and Janek saw the Juggernaut plunge through the swirling dust, falling back to LV-426.

“Janek. Look.”

As they stared in disbelief, a voice crackled onto the Magellan's comms.

"Dr. Watts. The Engineer is dead. You have a few seconds before the Juggernaut's computers take over."

Watts' eyes widened in astonishment.

"DAVID."

She seized the precious moment; centering the Juggernaut in the bridge window and slamming the throttle forward. Janek joined her in screaming as the Magellan hurtled out of the storm.

The Juggernaut's surface filled their view as they rammed into the colossal ship, causing it to tumble from the sky like a stone—intact but crippled.

The Magellan wasn't so lucky—breaking apart as its modules scattered. Some were whole, others were broken. All fell back into the storm. The Command Module, which included the bridge, remained intact.

Janek stayed strapped in his chair, while Watts went flying, hitting the floor and jostling the stitches on her torso. The window shattered, barraging the bridge with spears of broken glass.

Watts picked herself up. The module was in free fall, but she could still move. That meant there was still a chance at survival—even a slim one. Alarms

wailed. Lights flashed. She could faintly hear the escape pods popping open.

First, she needed to help Janek.

She turned to him, only to find him dead in his seat, translucent spikes of reinforced glass pinning him to the seat.

There wasn't time to grieve. Watts forced herself forward as a raging chain of hurricanes collected the command module. She dived into a coffin-sized escape pod, keying the controls and punching out. She braced herself as jets carried the pod through the gale-force winds. She watched as the command module plunged through the storm, tumbling and smashing against the ground in ruin. The engine pods hurtled to the ground, going nuclear and sending walls of fire twisting through the hurricane. The shockwaves tumbled Watts' escape pod through the air.

This landing was going to be rough.

The pod deployed a drag chute and retro rockets, cushioning the impact against LV-426's surface, but Watts was nonetheless winded as she popped the pod open, painfully rising to her feet. She was still caught in the storm, dirt whipping against her helmet. But, she could see the wreckage in the distance.

The Magellan was destroyed.

Everybody else was dead.

Watts stood, frozen in disbelief, only for a deep rumble to make her turn. The Juggernaut stood on its edge and was now rolling toward her—a crushing wheel of death as big as a mountain. She turned and ran like a child in a nightmare. She pumped her arms and legs as much as her body would allow, but the momentum felt flighty, like she would lift away at any second.

As the Juggernaut bared down on her, she turned aside, trying to get out of its course. Even at a dead sprint, she barely seemed to move, the Engineer construct was too big.

The Juggernaut wobbled toward her, slowing.

Her body had been through far too much and could carry her no longer. She collapsed with gasps, exhausted. The Juggernaut rolled to the ground, settling like a hoop around her, Watts in the center.

The winds carried the dust clouds away.

Watts didn't feel the impact. She passed out, her head dropping to the dirt below.

N I N E T E E N

A series of beeps filled Watts' helmet, bringing her back to consciousness. Her eyelids flickered as she raised her wrist to her line of sight. Her suit was flashing an oxygen warning.

'20 MINUTES REMAINING.'

She scrunched her face as she brought her aching body to its feet. She could feel the bruises on her skin, the stiffness in her joints, the tautness of her muscles. She was slightly more rested. But, without adrenaline firing through her body, the brunt of her nightmare had finally caught up with her.

She looked up—the Juggernaut’s doors wide open in front of her, practically welcoming her inside. But, as she stepped forward, she was greeted by the ship’s new occupant.

Watts had never stopped to think about why the Engineer was dead. The urgency of her situation had made that impossible. But now, the answer stood in front of her. It was an alien, similar to those inside the Magellan. However, its body was taller, with heavier musculature bulging underneath its reinforced exoskeleton. Unlike the pearl-white appearance of the creatures that spawned from her and Holloway, this behemoth was a dark gray.

It came from the Engineer’s chest, and it was the only creature capable of the massacre inside the pyramid.

With a sob of terror, Watts turned and fled toward the Magellan crash site, plunging herself into the storm, hoping it would give her cover against her perfectly evolved adversary. She traversed the field of burning debris—a wilderness of thunder, fire, and twisted metal.

She hazarded a peek over her shoulder. In the strobe-light flickers of lightning, a hazy, demonic form approached through the wreckage. She

scrambled through a section of ductwork, ducking under a hull fragment, running and clambering.

In the corner of her eye, she could see the alien hunting her—a game of cat-and-mouse among the fragments of the Magellan, coiling itself through corridors that went nowhere and stepping over the jetsam.

Watts' eyes swept frantically through the stormy night searching for anything—a weapon, a hiding spot, an answer.

She stumbled into the remains of the Magellan's laboratory. A hypersleep freezer laid on the barren ground. An idea hatched in Watts' head. She crawled inside and pulled the lid shut.

The plexiglass was the only barrier between her and the alien looming inches away. She held her breath, observing its terrifying form as it rooted itself in the wreckage. It had discovered the disembodied Engineer head that Watts and Holloway had attempted to preserve, lying in a pool of formaldehyde and shards of glass from its broken vat. The alien pawed at the head, before sinking its teeth into the rotten flesh and biting chunks away.

With each successive feed, the alien stiffened, its muscles tightening. It was growing in size. Watts sunk back against the wall of the fridge, hoping that

the alien would move on, now that its appetite was satiated.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Thick beads of newly drawn sweat slithered down Watts' brow as she turned to her wrist. The oxygen alarm was going off again.

'15 MINUTES REMAINING.'

She turned back to the glass to see the alien pressing its palms against the plexiglass case, sniffing at it with curiosity while chunk of dead Engineer flesh spilled from its snapping jaw. With sudden violence, the alien lashed out, sending the freezer flying. Watts tumbled out, the suit taking the shock of the collision.

She lurched to her feet and ran. The alien followed, ravening her as she led it through fragments of burning metal. Watts tripped, falling hard. She peered at her feet through the newly formed cracks in her helmet, and she spotted one of the diamond-bladed saws that DAVID used to dismantle the terraforming engine from the pyramid.

If anything was going to cut through this monstrosity, it was going to be diamond. She seized the saw, straining to manage its weight, as she slotted herself into the hollow of a massive girder.

The alien passed by, scenting the air. Watts froze, her arms trembling with the weight of the saw. How was she expecting this to go? A one-on-one fight? Even with a saw, she was hopelessly outmatched. She stayed frozen in anguish. The tiny rattle of the metal saw caught its attention. It swiveled its head toward her.

Watts was out of options. She was in for a fight. So, she powered up the saw, the blade whining up to speed.

There was no preamble. In the blink of an eye, the alien lunged at her, and she instinctively swung at it. The diamond blade sheared through the creature's claws, filling the air with its screams.

Its tail lashed out like a striking cobra, sending Watts sprawling. As she hit the harsh ground, she felt the saw slip out of her grasp, bouncing away with a harsh thud.

The alien wasted no time coming after her, slinking low to the ground. It clutched its injured arm to its chest, radiating vengeful fury.

Watts crawled for the saw, outstretching her hand as far as she could. Then, she couldn't move. Pain shot through her thigh. She turned to see the jagged tip of the alien's tail speared through her leg, pinning her to the ground. Her fingertips brushed against the

saw's handle as she wailed in agony. The alien stooped over her, its slavering face inches from her faceplate. Its hideous jaws opened. If Watts didn't do something—anything, it would crunch through her damaged helmet and slurp her brains out of her skull.

With all of her strength, through grinding teeth and salty, dirt-stained tears, Watts pulled against the spike in her leg, dragging the spear through the dirt. She snarled through the excruciating pain. The alien was done toying with her. It lunged forward, mouth open to deliver the final strike.

Watts met it with the buzzing diamond blade of the saw, plunging it through the creature's skull. A gout of green goo slithered down the saw and onto Watts' helmet. She jumped to her feet as the alien rolled over, thrashing in its death throes as the saw continued to growl in its head. As the creature's blood started to eat at her faceplate, Watts unlatched her helmet, tossing it to the dirt as it crumpled and melted.

She stood there, exposed to the toxic air, trying to find a solution through stinging eyes and sandpapered lungs. In the distance stood an intact module of the Magellan.

One last run, and then she'd finally be safe.

She took off to the piece of the Magellan, slapping the door switch, stepping inside as soon as it snapped open. The airlock closed behind her, and she felt the cool freshness of filtered air grace her throat. Through the thick film of tears sandwiched between her eyelids, she spotted familiar amenities. She was in Vickers' suite. It was still largely intact, even if the floor was a few degrees off-level.

She wandered around the space, turning things on—lights, music, surreal comforts. She took a gulp of cold water from the tap, even going as far as to change the bloody sheets and clean out the corpses—alien and human. This would be the perfect hub to rest while she thought of her next move. Vickers had to have some kind of emergency beacon in place. If Watts could find it, she could call for help.

The room's intercom crackled to life, DAVID's voice filtering through.

“Dr. Watts.”

T W E N T Y

On Dr. Jocelyn Watts' greatest day, the world turned as it always did.

She didn't know that for sure, as she was stuck on a desolate moon on the other side of the galaxy, but she felt reassured that the Engineers failed in their mission to destroy the human race. She had to feel that way because she didn't survive this long to find out that she no longer had a home to go to.

And, boy, did she want to go home. She yearned to feel Earth underneath her feet, breathe air that wasn't artificially recirculated, wear clothing that

wasn't a bulky spacesuit, and feel its sunlight on her skin.

"I know you're there. I can hear the beacons of your suit."

Watts pictured DAVID's severed head lying on the floor of the downed Juggernaut, desperately eyeing the ship's computer in the hope that she would respond.

She did respond, by stripping off her space suit wearily, tossing it aside as she sat on the bed.

"I'd like to propose an arrangement. I can be repaired. I can talk you through it."

Even if Watts were that desperate, she had no desire to rebuild DAVID—not after everything he'd put her through. Let him experience what it was like to lose control of his body—see how he liked it. Maybe he wouldn't be so high and mighty anymore.

"I think you'll find I can be of use to you."

She got up, walking to the intercom, and switching it off.

Eventually, the storm would pass. The fragments of the Magellan that stood in the dirt, creating their own makeshift city, no longer burned. The gray world of LV-426 was restored.

The wreck of the Juggernaut loomed in the distance.

Watts made her way through the wreckage in a military-grade spacesuit pilfered from Vickers' secret room, moving lithely with the lean build it provided her as opposed to the bulk of the Magellan crew spacesuit. She had a rifle slung over her shoulder, and a pistol strapped to her hip.

Gone was the meek scientist of yore. Now, she was so much more—a scavenger, a survivalist, a warrior. She pulled a cargo dolly loaded with salvage across the wastes, heading back to her makeshift unit base. On her return, she was greeted by the alien head she affixed to the door as a grisly trophy—a reminder that she could survive anything.

Inside, she stripped off her space suit, helping herself to a glass of vodka from the late Vickers' well-stocked bar. A chessboard sat atop a grand piano, the pieces moved across various squares.

A game was in progress.

"I've decided," DAVID announced through the intercom. "Rook takes Bishop."

Watts stepped over to the board, making the move for her absent opponent.

"Have you decided? On our arrangement?"

“I’m not going to fix you, DAVID. I don’t need you. I’ll hold out. A ship will come.”

“I’m certain. But who will send it? Man? Or Engineers?”

Watts fell silent. A frown formed over her face as she stared at the chessboard. He had a point. There were other Engineer strongholds across the galaxy. If any of them wanted to check on why one of their outposts went dark, they would be led directly to her.

And, while Watts was certainly capable of surviving anything, she was also very damn tired.

“Dr. Watts,” DAVID purred in his monotone. “It’s your turn.”

On the surface of LV-426, the massive central pyramid rose in the midst of the Engineer complex. With a thunderous boom, a bright beam of light shined forth from its peak, punching straight up through the clouds like a laser.

There were other pyramids on the moon’s surface, and they too responded with their own beams of light, scorching the sky with their brightness.

The barren moon hovered in space, adjacent to its father planet—an angry red god. Two dozen beams of light rose from LV-426, stretching out into the galaxy—visible, even from space.

They were a beacon.

A signal.

A beginning.

Witness the fury of the Gods

Following a mysterious extraterrestrial map, the crew of a prospecting ship discover an elaborate structure on the surface of a distant moon. The answers to questions regarding human culture, history, and evolution are inside, begging to be found. But, this discovery will come with pain, sacrifice, and a life-changing encounter with the engineers of their beginning... and their end.



TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX PRESENTS

ALIEN: ENGINEERS

**MICHAEL FASSBENDER • NOOMI RAPACE
LOGAN MARSHALL-GREEN • CHARLIZE THERON
IDRIS ELBA • SEAN HARRIS • RAFE SPALL & GUY PEARCE**

Produced by **DAVID GILER, WALTER HILL and RIDLEY SCOTT**

Directed by **RIDLEY SCOTT**

Screenplay by **JON SPAIHTS** Music by **MARC STREITENFELD**

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